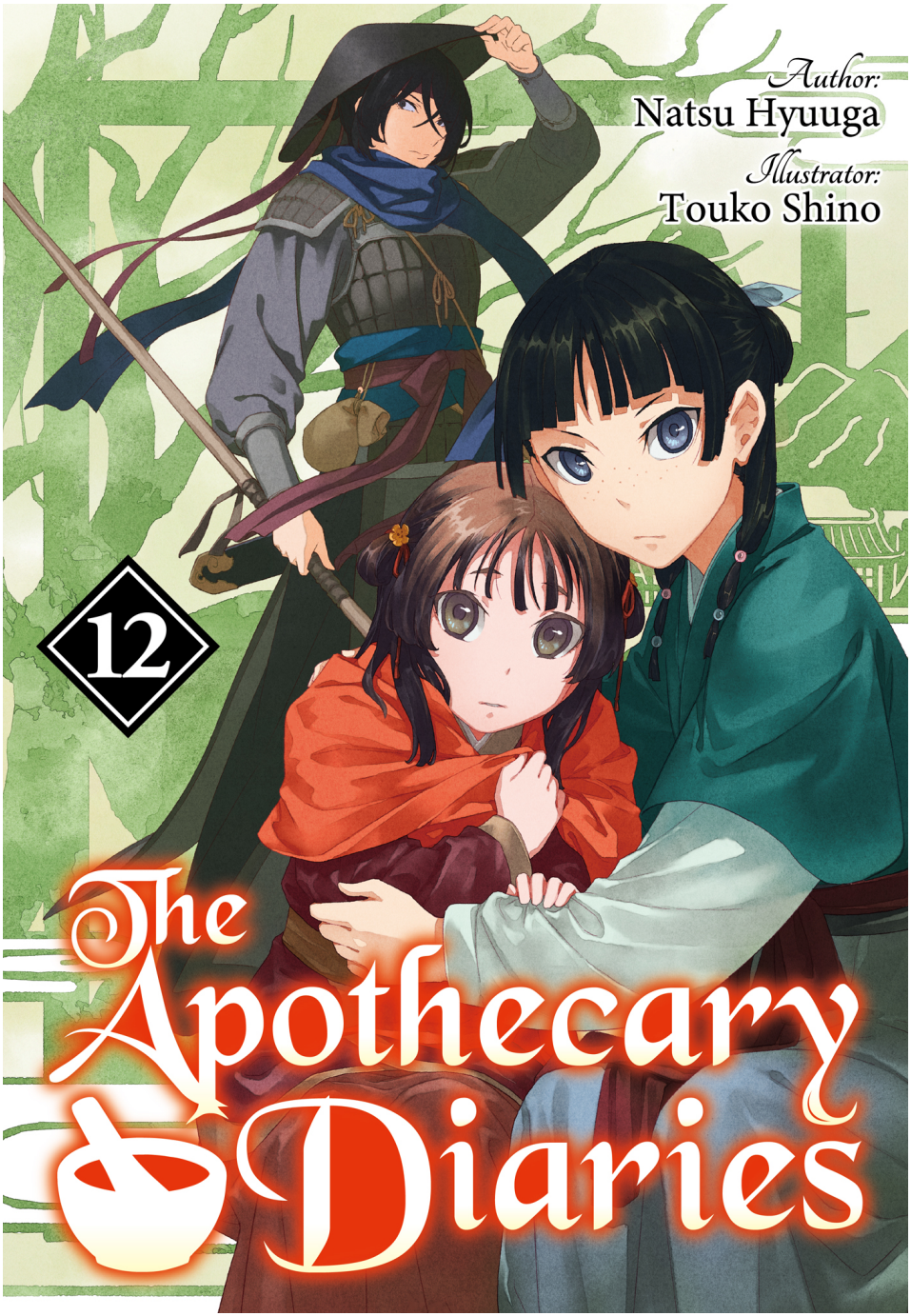
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The Apothecary Diaries

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Character Profiles

Maomao
Formerly an apothecary in the pleasure district. After a stint in the rear palace and then the imperial court, she now finds herself as an assistant to the physicians in the western capital. She's downright obsessed with medicines and poisons, but she can't get her hands on too many of them in her current location. She tries to mind her own position even as events carry her along. Twenty years old.

Jinshi
The Emperor's younger brother. He's a young man as beautiful as a celestial nymph. With Gyoku-ou dead, danger has gathered around him. Rikuson in particular foists a lot of work on him, and Jinshi is eager to get back at him someday. He doesn't have a very high opinion of himself, but he has everything he would need to be an excellent politician in a peaceful world. Real name: Ka Zuigetsu. Twenty-one years old.

Basen
Gaoshun's son and Jinshi's attendant. He doesn't feel pain as acutely as most people, which gives him far greater physical limits than most. Since coming to the western capital, he often works with his father, but because he so rarely sees his parents together, the experience can make him a little nervous. Guardian of the duck Jofu. Twenty-one years old.

Chue
Wife of Gaoshun's son Baryou. An enigma wrapped in a riddle wrapped in a clown, she mostly walks to the beat of her own drum. She's Jinshi's lady-in-waiting, but it seems she might serve another master.

Lihaku
A soldier. He accompanies Maomao to the western capital as her

bodyguard. He's a friendly guy, like a big mutt, but he spares no cruelty when something has to be done.

Lahan's Brother
Older brother of Lakan's adopted son, Lahan. He's actually a very capable person, but because he doesn't realize that, he always seems to get the short end of the stick. One gets the feeling that we're on the cusp of learning his real name.

The Quack Doctor
A eunuch. He used to serve in the rear palace, but he's not particularly skilled and has mostly gotten by on his luck. One thing he is good at is mellowing people around him. He's the ultimate anti-La-clan weapon.

Gaoshun
Basen's father, a well-built soldier, and Jinshi's former minder. He accompanies Jinshi to the western capital as his guard, along with his wife Taomei, so they're frequently together—something that seems to discomfit their two sons.

Lakan
Maomao's biological father and Luomen's nephew. This freak with a monocle adores Maomao, but everything seems to backfire on him. He's either a zero or a hero at any given moment, but if you try to use him and blow it, there's no telling what he might do.

Rikuson
Once Lakan's aide, he now serves in the western capital. He has a photographic memory for people's faces. In truth, he's a survivor of the otherwise exterminated Yi clan and has secretly exacted revenge for his family. Completing his life's work seems to have helped him relax, and he now spends his time tormenting the Emperor's younger brother.

Gyokuen
Empress Gyokuyou's father. Officially the leader of the western capital, but when his daughter ascended to the throne he moved to the royal capital. He left Gyoku-ou as acting governor of the western capital but sent Rikuson to act as his aide.

Gyoku-ou
Gyokuen's eldest son and Empress Gyokuyou's half-brother. With his father away, he led the western capital. He enjoyed tremendous support there, but all but ignored Jinshi. His tendency to let his xenophobia get mixed up in his politics led to his assassination.

Suiren
Jinshi's lady-in-waiting and former wet nurse. For Jinshi's sake, she goes to the western capital despite her age.

Baryou
Gaoshun's son and Basen's older brother. He's quick to develop a stomach ailment when confronted with another human being. Gets along well with the duck.

Vice Minister Lu
Second-in-command at the Board of Rites. He accompanies Jinshi to the western capital. Uncle of Maomao's colleague Yao.

Jofu
A common white duck with a dark spot on her beak. She began life as an egg hatched by Lishu, but from the moment she saw Basen, they've been inseparable—so inseparable that she even came with him to the western capital. Jofu knows how to get along in the world and can find food anywhere she happens to be.

Empress Gyokuyou
The Emperor's legal wife and an exotic beauty with red hair and green eyes. She's from the western capital herself, but she has complicated feelings about her half-brother. Twenty-two years old.

Dahai
Gyokuen's third son. He's in charge of maritime transport in the western capital.

Shikyou
Gyoku-ou's eldest son. Twenty-five years old.

Yinxing

Gyoku-ou's eldest daughter. Twenty-four years old.

Feilong
Gyoku-ou's second son. Something of a congenital bureaucrat. Twenty-three years old.

Hulan
Gyoku-ou's third son. Very humble. Eighteen years old.

Xiaohong
Yinxing's daughter; Gyoku-ou's granddaughter. Her habit of eating her own hair led to an intestinal blockage, which Maomao and Tianyu resolved by performing surgery.

Gyokujun
Shikyou's son and Gyoku-ou's grandson. A real brat.

The Apothecary Diaries

Introduction

The Truth About Chue

Maomao and the others find themselves dragged into domestic strife in the western capital, whether they like it or not. They've been asked to prepare Gyoku-ou's three sons to succeed him, but Shikyou's son Gyokujun takes a dislike to the visitors from the royal capital and starts making himself a nuisance.

Who will succeed to the leadership of the western capital? Amid the pondering and bargaining, Maomao finds herself confronted with new problems: the discord among Gyoku-ou's grandchildren, a case of food poisoning at a distillery, and a young woman from a foreign land with a mysterious illness.

The greatest mystery of all, though, might be Chue, whose actions are even harder to fathom than usual. What is she really after? Chue's true face is about to be revealed...but will Maomao survive to go home to the royal capital? And is it finally time for her to clarify her relationship with Jinshi?

Prologue

How she wanted to be worth something.

How she wanted to be precious and irreplaceable to someone, the way she and her mother had been to her father.

Her mother had disappeared. She'd thought she had been showered with affection because she was a child—but that turned out to be an illusion, only a ploy to gain a moment's tranquility.

She and her father had cherished her mother as an invaluable member of their family—when to her mother they had been only tools, interchangeable, replaceable.

Out of an excess of trust in her mother, her father had vanished. Probably dead somewhere he would never be found.

Without her father, who had treasured her like a pearl in his palm, she truly was worthless.

What should she do?

If she was worthless, then she was useless as well. She didn't know what she should do.

So she went looking for her mother.

She *could* be useful. She *would* be useful.

That thought possessed her as she searched...

That thought, and a wish. The hope that there might be a place for someone as worthless as her.

Chapter 1: The Princeling of the Main House

It had been ten days since Gyoku-ou's death. His demise had made the bigwigs very busy. Maomao's job, however, had not changed much. She still made medicine, still examined the sick and the injured and gave that medicine to them.

Specializing does make some things easier, she thought. *You just have to do one type of work.*

There was a bit more of that work to do, but it was all of a familiar kind.

Once you were in a leadership position, that was no longer true. You had to keep an eye on the work of subordinates that you might not completely understand yourself. When problems arose, prompt decisions were expected—but you couldn't give simplistic answers either. No wonder diligent officials began to break down physically and mentally.

All of which was to say, Jinshi was exhausted and weak, as usual, but he was getting his work done.

Here I thought he'd learned to step back just a little bit.

Even during their regular exams, Maomao (who accompanied the quack doctor) saw officials carting more paperwork into Jinshi's office. She was getting pretty tired of it.

"I think that's enough for today," Gaoshun said, rebuffing a bureaucrat who had come with more papers. He looked tired too. He met Maomao's eyes and dipped his head, expressionless. It made him look very somber—but the impression was undercut by the duck, Jofu, who stood beside him, tugging on his robe in hopes of getting some food.

I seem to remember him feeding a cat in the rear palace.

Apparently he now provided the same service for the duck.

"Is the Moon Prince really doing all right?" the quack doctor asked, watching the bureaucrat leave with his papers. He didn't seem quite so tense with Gaoshun, maybe because they'd known

each other since the rear palace.

"He's certainly tired, but I'm hopeful that he'll soon regain his energy." Gaoshun looked directly at Maomao as he ushered her into the room.

If all went as usual, the quack doctor would be dismissed after a perfunctory examination, which would leave only Maomao.

"All right, young lady. I leave the rest in your hands!" The quack doctor departed and Maomao, basically trading off with him, went into Jinshi's bedroom.

Yikes...

Jinshi lay spread-eagle on the bed. Apparently he had used up all his social graces during his interaction with the quack. He didn't seem to have it in him to do anything else today—but a distinct sense of aggravation hovered around him.

"Rikuson," he was muttering. "I'll never forgive Rikuson..."

The breezy man must have foisted yet more work on Jinshi.

"You seem tired, sir."

"I *am* tired."

"I'll make this quick, then. Let me see your wound."

Jinshi didn't say anything, but sat up looking like a pouting child. He sloughed off the top of his robe and undid the bandages.

There's really no need for these anymore.

The bandages now were more about concealing the injury than helping it heal. New skin was growing over the scorched, charred old skin, forming a bright-red flower. It would have been beautiful if it hadn't been inscribed on human flesh—especially not the flank of someone who was supposed to be very important.

They'll also help keep his organs in if he ever gets stabbed in the side.

Maomao figured he didn't really need the salve either, but applied it anyway just to keep things from drying out. Then she wrapped fresh bandages around the site. She'd told him repeatedly to do it himself, but he always wanted her to do it.

"There. All done."

"Isn't this bandage a little twisted?"

"No, sir, it's not."

"It is. I think you should take it off and redo it."

So he was going to complain about her bandage wrapping technique, was he? When he did things like that, it usually meant there was something more he wanted to talk about.

Maomao sensed trouble coming. She tried to turn right around and leave the room, but Gaoshun gave her such a sad look that she went back.

"What seems to be the matter?" she asked.

"Funny you should ask," Jinshi replied. It sounded like this story was going to be a long one. Maomao thought getting some rest would do more for his health, but maybe his mind was in worse shape than his body at the moment.

Many different people came to visit Jinshi; he had to deal with all of them in between going through his piles of paperwork. Of late, there had been particularly frequent visits from one fellow higher-up from the royal capital and Gyoku-ou's half-siblings.

Of that higher-up, Vice Minister Lu, Maomao knew only a smidgen, such as that he was with the Board of Rites—and, to her surprise, he was her colleague Yao's uncle. Chue had mentioned it to her in passing once.

So he's the famous uncle.

This uncle was supposedly dead set on getting Yao married. Maomao thought the vice minister had given her a funny look once when they passed by each other—maybe he didn't like that she was Yao's colleague.

"That Vice Minister Lu does make a nuisance of himself, doesn't he?" Maomao said. She'd taken a seat and was sipping at some grape wine—Jinshi's examination was over and now she was just going to listen to him gripe. Surely no one would blame her for exacting a modest fee.

"He does! He keeps saying we should hurry and go back to the capital."

"Yes, let's do that. Right away," Maomao said earnestly. By all rights, there was no reason for them to stay here.

"Do you think we could do that so soon?"

It was Jinshi who resolutely stayed stuck in the western capital. He couldn't go home with everything still in disarray. He was the kind who felt he had to see things through to the bitter end, sometimes to his own detriment. That was probably why Rikuson was able to foist so much work on him.

People with a strong sense of responsibility soon grow sick at heart.

Maomao knew: just because you were a good person didn't mean good things would happen to you.

"You would think there would be plenty of people in the

western capital who could fill in for Master Gyoku-ou. And Master Gyokuen is still alive too. Master Gyoku-ou was his son—didn't he say anything to you?"

Quite honestly, Maomao would have expected the man to be distraught when he learned that his son had died in his absence. But Gyokuen, it seemed, was pleading that his age made it impossible for him to return to the western capital.

Anyway, I'm not sure that his coming back here wouldn't make things worse.

If Gyokuen returned to the western capital, it would be the Imperial capital that found itself in dire straits next. Empress Gyokuyou was now His Majesty's official wife, but there were many who resented her bloodline. The new Crown Prince, her son, had inherited his mother's red hair and green eyes. Maomao had met him when he was young and the pigment still light, and as he grew older the colors would get stronger. It wasn't hard to imagine him finding trouble because of his un-Linese hair and eyes.

Then there were those who sneered at I-sei Province as a rural backwater. Consort Lihua had a son as well, born just a few months after the Crown Prince, and plenty of people would be willing to trade the one for the other if anything should happen.

Yep, yep. Politics is a pain in the neck.

Maomao munched on a sachima to go with her wine. A wheat-based treat distinguished by its fluffiness, it was a bit crude to serve as Jinshi's snack, but more than luxurious enough when the food supply was still unstable.

"Sir Gyokuen would like Sir Gyoku-ou's line to continue ruling here. He said as much in his letter. Though I might have preferred if he'd have been kind enough to give me a name."

That would explain why none of Gyoku-ou's half-brothers had been willing to take on the role. It was probably the same matter that was continually bringing them to visit Jinshi.

"Ahem. Master Gyokuen's second and third sons are here a lot, aren't they? Could we really not leave things to them? I assumed that was what you were talking about together."

Maomao still hadn't heard the second son's name, but the third son was named Dahai. He was a well-built man in his mid-thirties, in charge of I-sei Province's ports. He was, in fact, one of the visitors who had come to the annex that very day.

"Sir Dahai is here because he had a request of me."

“Is it something annoying?”

Judging by Jinshi’s petulant look, it didn’t seem like anything good.

“He asked if I might consider transferring my base of operations.”

“Your base of operations, sir?” Maomao tilted her head, unsure what that meant.

“Oh, it’s nothing much. He merely suggested I move from the annex to the main house.”

“I see, sir.”

“Nothing much, right?”

“I believe that’s what you just said, Master Jinshi.”

One could walk from the annex to the main house in a trice, whistling a tune the entire time.

“The main house is right next door to the administrative office. Which would make it easier for them to add to your workload—is that what this is about?”

“One presumes.”

“And it would really raise some red flags if they tried to get you to go directly to the administrative office, so they’re moving you in stages, getting you used to the idea.”

“What am I, a feral cat they’ve adopted?” Jinshi looked spent. Maybe the exhaustion had just caused him to abandon any pretense. “If I’m too willing to move, I think the chance to go home will only get further away.” Funny thing to say, when he was the one who’d refused to leave.

It was a dilemma: on the one hand, they wanted Jinshi to go back to the central region; on the other, they wanted him to stay here in the western capital.

“Couldn’t you just refuse to move your ‘base,’ sir?”

“Believe me, I’d like to. But do you know what they say about the Emperor’s younger brother in the western capital these days?”

Maomao didn’t pull any punches. “They shout and swoon over your beauty, but at the same time, some conspiracy theorists hold that you masterminded the assassination of Master Gyoku-ou.”

“Mm.”

“Did you?”

“No!”

Figured.

Jinshi didn’t seem particularly adept at underhanded schemes

like assassination. Yes, he had been more than willing to use his wiles to get his way in the rear palace when he had been posing as a eunuch, but recently he had become much more reserved. Maomao almost thought he was regressing.

"That leaves people claiming that I came to the western capital only in order to take it over."

"Why come to this parched place when you could make lots more profit finagling things in the royal capital? You could buy up grain, then sell it at a high price and wring the money out of them."

"You sound positively brutal."

"It was Miss Chue's idea." Chue was something of a chatterbox, and she loved to use Maomao as an excuse to dodge work. "Anyway, if you go to the main house, won't you only look even more like you're bent on conquest?"

"Sir Gyoku-ou's brothers and children are at the main house. The suggestion is that security would be better served by having everyone in one place, rather than splitting the guards between the main house and the annex."

"You're not afraid of someone trying to stab you to get revenge for their brother or father?"

"I like to *think* that wouldn't happen," Jinshi said after a moment. "Really, if anyone were feeling that emotional about it, I would have expected to see at least one assassin already."

Commuting to the administrative office certainly would be much easier from the main house. Maomao wondered if she and the rest of Jinshi's entourage would go with him.

Not that I'd really like to.

She could just picture a weird old fart hanging around, and it worried her. She was pretty sure the freak strategist was staying over there. Hence, Maomao was invested in maintaining the status quo.

"I can't shake the sense that the move wouldn't have many tangible benefits for you, Master Jinshi. Would it be a problem just to turn them down? You sound strangely unsure of what to do."

"I understand what you're saying, but I think I have to meet them in the middle, or we won't get anywhere."

There it is.

Jinshi was too direct, too honest, and sometimes it cost him. Maomao had a certain respect for that part of his personality, but it could be infuriating.

He should just put his foot down with them!

She was about to say so when Jinshi added, “Ahh, and the main house also has that thing.”

“What thing?” She cocked her head. She had no idea what this thing was.

“The greenhouse. Didn’t you see it last time we came?”

“A g-g-greenhouse?!” Maomao couldn’t stop her eyes from sparkling. She’d seen cactuses planted around the grounds when they had come last year—at which time they had stayed in the main house—but she hadn’t heard about any greenhouse.

“They said that if I moved to the main house, I could use the greenhouse to cultivate herbs.” Jinshi glanced at Maomao, then grinned openly. “But I gather you’d be just as happy to stay at the annex, Maomao?”

“Wh-Whatever do you mean, Master Jinshi? Never fear! I would certainly follow you to the main house!”

She pounded her chest for emphasis, so hard that she broke down coughing.

The move to the main house soon proceeded. The quack doctor was to come with them, not that it would change much of anything.

There was, however, at least one person who decided to stay behind. Lahan’s Brother surprised them. “A greenhouse is outside my field of expertise. It’s not like you’ll be far away. I think I’ll stay here,” he said. On his head was a duck, and beside him was a goat.

“Oh. I figured a pro farmer like you, Lahan’s Brother, would jump at the chance to grow things,” Maomao said.

“Who’s a ‘pro’?! Look, it’s not that I couldn’t do it. It’s just I have to focus on things that fall within the scope of my responsibilities. All I really do is imitate the things I’ve learned.”

Maomao thought it was awfully professional to know—and be clear about—what you could and couldn’t do, but she kept that to herself. It was certainly better than someone who pretended to possess knowledge they didn’t have.

“My specialty is grains,” Lahan’s Brother said. “You know a lot more about herbs than I do.”

“I suppose so.”

He said specialty! Maomao observed, but she pretended not to have heard. How nice of her.

“Anyway, like I said, I’ll still be close by. If anything comes up,

call me."

"Thank you, I will." Maomao bowed to Lahan's Brother. She suspected she would do quite a bit of calling on him, whether he encouraged her to or not.

The main house was substantially larger than the annex, and the medical office Maomao and the others were introduced to was bigger too.

This must be the place Dr. Li was entrusted with.

Of all the medical personnel sent from the capital city, Dr. Li was the most serious and most intimidating. And since their last meeting, Maomao had added *most pessimistic* to that catalog.

Looks like he's still at the clinic in town.

The shelves here were neatly organized, making them easy to use, although most of the medicine had been taken to the clinic. There were also beds and chairs, neatly arranged. Maomao's group hadn't brought much equipment themselves, so it seemed like this wouldn't take long.

"Shall I help you clean up your room, miss?" the quack asked, and for some reason his eyes were sparkling. He was holding an embroidered curtain.

"No, I can take care of myself. You can clean up your own room, please."

She was not going to spend another night in a hideous, frill-laden chamber. She was even thinking that maybe next time they were running short on bandages, she could tear up that curtain for material.

A well-built soldier ambled up. "Hey, young lady?"

"Something the matter, Master Lihaku?"

"I need to use the toilet. You don't mind if I leave you here?"

"I don't think it should be a problem."

Lihaku was more diligent than he might appear. There was another guard still standing outside the new medical office, so Maomao figured it should be fine.

"Sorry. I didn't get a chance to relieve myself on my break."

"No, it's all right."

The soldiers got breaks, yes, but a long shift could see them standing for half a day at a time. Bureaucrats occasionally sneered that it must be nice to have so much free time, but the work was demanding in its own way.

Lihaku said a few words to the other guard, then went to find the toilet. They didn't know their way around this place, and it seemed like it might take him a few minutes. Maomao busied herself bringing in equipment and unloading the last of their cargo.

"There! All done."

She was just giving a big stretch when she heard a shout from outside. "Yowch!" That was the quack doctor.

Maomao went out, wondering what had happened, to find the quack plopped down outside the office, rubbing his shin. There was also a boy holding a wooden training sword. The guard had been keeping an eye on Maomao, apparently to the exclusion of the quack doctor.

"I! Have judged you! You intruding insects!"

The boy must have been eight or nine years old. He was dressed in fine clothing and his hair was carefully done up. Those things would seem to mark him out as the scion of a good family, but that didn't matter much right now.

Maomao crouched by the quack and looked at his shin. With one of those wooden training swords, even a young kid could cause a nasty bruise. She glared at the boy. "What do you think you're doing?!"

He didn't so much as flinch at her raised voice; in fact, he stepped forward in a show of strength. "I! Have delivered punishment! Upon the criminal!"

Who's a criminal?

Maomao was just stalking toward the child to deliver *him* a good knuckle to the head when a panicked servingwoman rushed up and grabbed him. "Young master, you mustn't!" She started bowing furiously to Maomao. "I'm sorry! I'm so very sorry!"

Maomao clenched her fist and stared daggers at the naughty child.

"Hey, let me go! I am going to slaughter the lot of them!" the kid shouted.

"No, young master, you can't do this here! You can't do this. I'm so sorry." With her head still bowed, the servingwoman dragged the boy away.

Maomao had no choice but to let her fist relax. She was just glad the servant had made a prompt exit. Child or not, she really had been about to smack him one. No mercy for kids who went around whacking people with swords.

"My apologies!" the guard said, his face white. He would be blamed for letting the quack get injured after Lihaku had entrusted him with this job.

"I don't need any more apologies. Help me get the master physician inside."

Maomao touched the quack's shin. "Owww! It hurts!" he cried, really rather overdramatically. The bone wasn't broken, but he probably wouldn't be walking anywhere for a few days.

Judging by that outfit and the servant looking after him...

It seemed safe to assume the boy was a relative of Gyokuen's.

They'd barely gotten here, and already Maomao had a feeling that there was going to be nothing but trouble.

Maomao pressed a damp rag against the quack's leg. Unfortunately, the abused shin had swollen substantially by the next day.

"It should be better in two or three days," Maomao told him. In her opinion, the quack could just as well spend that time resting in his room. But he insisted on working, and she couldn't very well

chase him out of his own medical office.

I really don't think it would be a big problem if he weren't here, she thought, but she wasn't cruel enough to say so out loud.

"Urrgh, it hurts..."

"I'm sorry, miss," Lihaku said, bowing his head. The boy had seized on a brief moment when Lihaku wasn't there. A single, fleeting lapse of attention by the guard. Maybe it had been in part because the interloper was just a child—but it remained that this boy had evaded the guard's scrutiny and managed to harm the quack.

It's because they're really guarding me*, isn't it?* Maomao thought. Outwardly, the soldiers were assigned to the physicians, and so in principle they were supposed to be protecting the quack doctor. But the remaining soldier had actually been watching Maomao.

The soldiers didn't specifically give Maomao any special treatment—probably a touch of consideration on Jinshi's part. But there seemed to be a tacit understanding of who she truly was.

Much as I hate for people to think of me as that freak's daughter. Therefore, as long as the guards didn't bring it up, Maomao was happy to act the part of an ordinary medical assistant. That was all she was, and nothing more.

And yet, she didn't want the quack doctor being put in danger because of that. It seemed the guard yesterday wasn't yet used to protecting VIPs. That was one of the reasons Lihaku had seemed so apologetic about needing to go to the bathroom. He was the one permanently assigned to the medical office, while the other guards came in on rotation—and there were a lot of new faces these days.

"Knock knoooock! Incoming!" Chue entered, pretending to knock on the medical office door. "Poor Mister Quack! I've come to visit you at your sickbed!" She was holding some grapes, a common fruit in the western capital.

"Oh, Miss Chue, that's so kind of you."

Whoa, wait, hold on there. Did he really not care that she called him "quack" like it was nothing?

"Miss Maomao! Would you like to know which no-goodnik it was that attacked Mister Quack yesterday?"

"Who? If it was someone from this estate, I assume it had to be one of Master Gyokuen's grandchildren or great-grandchildren."

"Bingo! It was Master Gyoku-ou's oldest son's son."

I might have guessed.

Maomao had heard that Gyoku-ou was nearly old enough to be Empress Gyokuyou's father himself, so it wasn't that surprising if he had a grandson the age of the boy who had attacked the quack.

"They say his name is Gyokujun!" Chue sketched a character in the air with her finger. Apparently the family had a thing for naming their children after birds: as the *-ou* of Gyoku-ou meant "nightingale," *jun* meant "falcon." Chue went on, "Also, young Gyokujun wishes to apologize and is standing outside the medical office with his mother right now. What would you like to do?"

"You could have led with that."

Maomao looked at the quack doctor. Rather than actually say yes, he smiled. "He's still just a child, after all. If he knows he did wrong and wants to apologize, then it's water under the bridge!"

Gee. Nice guy...

Maomao wasn't so sure, but the quack doctor was the victim here, so they would do as he said.

"Come in," Maomao said as she opened the office door, although she didn't look very happy about it.

Gyokujun was standing there, not looking any more pleased than Maomao. A woman stood next to him, a timid look on her face. "I can't apologize enough for what my son did," she said, bowing deeply.

She pressed on the back of her brat's head, trying to make him bow too, but he said, "S-Stoppit! I'm not gonna say sorry!"

"You apologize this instant!"

"Nuh-uh! No way!" Gyokujun whined.

Now his mother was angry. She raised her hand high, and almost at the same moment they heard the slap, Gyokujun went crumpling to the ground.

An openhanded slap wouldn't leave a lasting mark, but it sure sounded dramatic. Maomao doubted the boy was actually hurt, but he was still physically small enough that his body probably couldn't absorb the blow.

"I said, apologize!" His mother looked like she might burst into tears. Maybe the stress of child-rearing was bubbling to the surface.

Gyokujun sniffled and pinched his lips together, trying not to cry. "I... I'm very sorry," he said, although he obviously didn't mean it. He showed every sign that he would do it again if he got the chance, but the quack doctor was watching his mother anxiously.

"That's enough, please, it's really fine. Please, don't bow to me."

Gyokujun's mother, however, only bowed again, insisting, "I am so, so sorry!" Gyokujun was already out of his bow and scowling at the quack.

Signs of a lesson learned: zilch, Maomao observed.

When mother and son had left, Maomao was hit by a wave of exhaustion.

"Do you think he's all right? That was some slap she gave him," the quack said, much concerned about a child who had shown no repentance.

"Aw, every parent gives their child a good whack now and then, buddy. Most men can remember doing sword drills until they went unconscious from shouting," said Lihaku.

"Exactly. It was nothing much. He's just lucky she didn't use a closed fist," Chue added.

"An open palm isn't such a big deal. Although it's trouble if there's an injury somewhere it can't be seen. The solar plexus is a good compromise—it hurts, but it doesn't show," offered Maomao.

"*What* kinds of homes were you three raised in?" the quack asked, drawing back a little. He was a eunuch, but he originally came from a good family, and had probably never suffered "the punishment of the iron fist" at the hands of his parents.

Still, it wasn't that Maomao didn't understand the quack's concern. "The boy's mother did seem sort of frantic. I guess a person could get in a lot of trouble for harming the Imperial younger brother's personal physician."

As much trouble as one might get in, though, the mother seemed worried about something more.

"Shall Miss Chue explain that one?" Chue said, striking a pose with her finger pointed toward the ceiling.

"Do you know? Was there a reason?" the quack said, immediately curious. Lihaku looked like he wanted to know too. Maomao had to admit that she was curious, but she affected disinterest, as if she would just listen in if everyone else wanted to know.

"Master Gyoku-ou has passed away, and the western capital is all agog about who's going to be the next leader here. Every name you can think of has been suggested, from Master Gyokuen's other sons to Mister Rikuson from the royal capital, to even the Moon Prince himself!"

"Yes, I've heard all that," Maomao said.

Mostly from a complaining Jinshi.

"The one person whose hat *hasn't* been thrown into the ring is the one person you would expect to be first in line—did you know that?"

Lihaku said slowly, "Normally, you would expect Master Gyoku-ou's son to succeed him. That's how it works, even in the Imperial family, right?"

He was right, indeed.

"Precisely. But! That son has been kept completely out of politics throughout his life, on the grounds that he wouldn't need to be involved until later. He's been ruled out on the basis of ignorance, or so the story goes. But doesn't that seem strange?"

"Yes, so it does. You would think he'd have studied a little more," said the quack doctor.

"With what I've said so far, I would expect Miss Maomao at least to be able to see where this is going. In reality, Master Gyoku-ou's eldest son is—da-dada-daaaah!—a lazy, profligate layabout!" Chue waved her hands enthusiastically and produced a shower of confetti. "He did get the education you'd expect of an intended successor, but then he threw it all away."

"'Threw it all away' how?"

"He had...let's call it a late rebellious phase. By that time, though, he was already married to the woman his parents had chosen for him, and even had a child. But he stole a horse and ran off! You'd think he was some little kid!"

Maomao thought about how uncomfortable the mother had seemed earlier.

"So his own relatives aren't treating him as the heir apparent, and folks are even suggesting people unrelated by blood to be the next leader. He must be pretty bad," Lihaku said, crossing his arms.

"Oh, very bad! This eldest son is some twenty-five years old. He abandoned his home several years ago, leaving his wife and child, and...well, let's just say he's been up to a lot."

That might explain the mother's mean streak, Maomao admitted. No doubt her relatives blamed her for "not keeping a close enough eye on her husband."

"Like what?" Maomao asked.

"Master Gyokuen's second-to-last son, his seventh, is twenty-five too, and the two of them don't get along. They fight all the time. Once, there was a whole thing when they decided on a duel

with real edged weapons. Both of them are so good that no one could stop them. Oh, it was terrible!"

Hmm, hmm!

"Then he started brewing his own liquor, 'borrowing' bottles from a nearby distillery, filling them with his moonshine and selling them. That tanked the distillery's reputation. It's worth noting that the place was run by Gyokuen's third daughter."

Hmm?

"Also, Miss Maomao, you remember how we were attacked by bandits when we went to that farming village? Apparently he was also connected with that incident."

Hmmmm?!

Maomao held up a hand for Chue to stop.

"What seems to be the matter, Miss Maomao?"

"I'm amazed Master Gyoku-ou didn't disown him."

"Being the eldest son probably helped protect him a little. And Master Gyoku-ou has some odd preoccupations, so he never gave his second or third sons any education in politics at all. Anyway, the eldest son was a well-behaved and capable young man until he went off the deep end, so maybe Master Gyoku-ou thought he would come back around eventually. The son's a powerful guy and a leader—I heard that when he was attacked by the boss of a bandit gang known all around I-sei Province, he went to get the guy back himself."

Chue nibbled on a fried dough twist she'd gotten somewhere. She'd distributed them to the quack doctor and Lihaku as well, and they were also eating.

Getting revenge on a bandit, huh? Very much the sort of "hero" image that Gyoku-ou had so prized.

"As for Master Gyoku-ou's younger brothers, they're all too busy with business to lead the western capital. But we absolutely can't leave the job to his eldest son. Mister Rikuson and the Moon Prince were probably put forward to buy some time. Master Gyoku-ou's second and third sons are both clever guys. We can gain enough time for them to learn about politics. I think plans are being laid for the eldest son to be disinherited before then. With Master Gyoku-ou gone, he's lost his protection."

"You sure know a lot, Miss Chue," the quack doctor said admiringly—although these seemed like things she probably wasn't *supposed* to know.

These were Gyokuen's children: toughness and stubbornness were guaranteed. They were *using* the Emperor's younger brother in order to buy themselves time.

"That does explain why that boy's mother looked so worried," Maomao said. Marrying a family's eldest son didn't mean much if that son got himself kicked out of the family line. And if her own son went on to injure the Imperial younger brother's physician, well, that would be enough to make the blood run cold.

"In light of all that, it seems likely that the second or third son will be assigned to serve under the Moon Prince for a while, and the other one will be assigned to Mister Rikuson. If one of them proves to be an especially quick study, that means we'll be able to go back to the central region all the sooner. And speaking of going back, Miss Chue had better get back to work."

She stood up as if to signal that the conversation was over; she was done with her snack, anyway.

Maomao raised her hand. "Miss Chue? Question."

"Yes, Miss Maomao? What is it?"

Maomao recalled that they were now stationed in the main house. "Does this worthless layabout of a son ever come to the main house?"

"Not very often, but I gather he stops by to see family every once in a while. It's certainly possible you might bump into him." Chue gave a broad wink.

Please... Don't jinx it.

Maomao foresaw many travails in her future. She did the best thing she could do: she shook her head and tried to forget about it.

Chapter 2: The Greenhouse and the Chapel

When Maomao had tidied up her new room, she went to see the rumored greenhouse.

"Oh! My! *Gosh!*" she exclaimed, her eyes shining, as she observed the facility. It was a building of brick and wood, parts of the ceiling and walls made of transparent glass so sunlight could get in. Inside, they were growing exotic succulents and even cucumbers. Cucumbers were a vegetable you could pluck out of the fields in summer, an easy way to get some water, but in the western capital they were treated as rare and valuable goods.

"It's difficult to grow cucumbers in the west, so they're considered a sign of wealth. For that reason, we often serve fresh cucumbers when we have visitors from farther west. They also happen to be a favorite of Master Gyokuen; he likes to eat them sandwiched between pieces of thin-sliced bread."

This explanation was being proffered by the gardener who ran the greenhouse. He'd even kindly prepared some bread and butter for a taster, and looked ready to whip up a little something for them to try right there.

However...

"Miss Maomao, you're starting to dance!"

"Yeah, miss, take it easy. There's people watching!"

Chue and Lihaku looked at her, vaguely concerned.

"Hey, I know that!" Maomao said, even as she whipped a pair of scissors out from amidst the folds of her robes. "Cuuuucumbers!" she sang out. "Cucumber leeeeaves! Cucumber steeeems!"

The moment she took one of the vegetables by the stem, however, the gardener had a hand firmly on her shoulder. "Forgive me, but *what*, may I ask, do you think you're doing?" A vein pulsed on his forehead.

"I just thought, cucumber season is almost over. You won't need these much longer."

It was only going to get colder. Greenhouse or no greenhouse, Maomao suspected, it would soon be impossible to grow cucumbers.

"They can still be harvested." The gardener's grip got firmer.

"The leaves and stems, to say nothing of the fruit itself, of course, are all potential medicinal ingredients, but they'll be useless if they wither first. If I don't take them now, when will I have the chance?" Maomao said, meeting the gardener's gaze and refusing to back down. They found themselves locked in a staring contest.

"*These* are for *food*," the gardener said, his eyes bulging.

"The western capital is facing an unprecedented crisis. Medicine is in desperately short supply. Don't you think you should help?"

By now, they were using substitutes for many medicines. This was no time to be growing vegetables just to indulge someone's culinary inclinations.

"I'm given to understand that you've received permission to use the greenhouse. I have to wonder, however, if they also told you that you could just *do whatever you wanted* with the plants that are already here."

"These cucumbers are on their way out, and they'll have hardly any nutritional value, anyway. Don't you think the obvious thing would be to use them as medicinal ingredients?"

Maomao and the gardener continued their standoff.

After a brief stalemate, Chue arrived with the gardener's superior. The boss gave the gardener the rundown, but the man refused to capitulate.

"I don't think things here are quite what they told the Moon Prince," Chue observed.

"I think this boss is the kind who avoids telling his people any bad news in order to put on a good front for the dignitaries from out of town," replied the surprisingly perceptive Lihaku, capably reading the situation.

He was exactly right, and the gardener was the unfortunate victim. Here was a man who'd even had bread made so that they could try the products of his beloved greenhouse. Maomao had to admit she felt a little bad for him, but this wasn't what they had been told.

Why does he think I came to the main house?

In the end, it was decided that Maomao would use only one-third of the greenhouse. The soon-to-be-out-of-season cucumbers would go to her, however. With many an aggrieved look at Maomao, the gardener, on the edge of tears, set about making an *Authorized Personnel Only* sign to keep her out of his succulents.

"What kind of medicine can you make with these?" Lihaku asked as he helped Maomao gather the cucumbers and harvest their leaves and stems.

"They're very common in antipyretics. They're also effective against food poisoning and encourage urination. They can be used to induce vomiting as well."

"Wait, when would you need to induce vomiting?"

"When you've taken more than the necessary amount of poison, for example."

"That's not a thing people normally do!" Lihaku smiled genially even as he delivered the sharp quip. It was one of his virtues that he wasn't quick to anger, but if Maomao could have anything she wanted, she might have wished for him to have the particular quickness of wit that Lahan's Brother possessed.

She and the others collected the vegetables, the leaves, the stems, and even the vines. Then they pulled the naked cucumber plants up by the roots, leaving only empty earth behind. The gardener looked at Maomao as if she had killed his parents, but she paid him no mind.

Somewhere along the line the duck, a perfectly ordinary duck like you might see anywhere, arrived and started pecking at the insects that emerged from the freshly turned earth.

"What are you going to plant now that you've got a plot to work with?" Lihaku asked.

"Good question. I was thinking maybe I'd start by just planting every kind of seed I have on hand. I don't know what's going to grow in the greenhouse, so maybe I can start by seeing what takes."

"Every kind of seed? Is there space for that?"

Maomao paused. "Maybe if we tear up that other cucumber plot too."

It looked like sparks would fly once more between her and the gardener. Two people who refuse to give an inch are always far from the path of peace.

“Miss Maomao, Miss Maomao!”

“What’s the matter, Miss Chue?”

Chue seemed to have spotted something. She was pressed against the glass wall and peering outside.

“There’s a chapel over there! Mind if I go take a look?”

“A chapel?”

Chue pointed, and Maomao saw a building in the distinctive western style. There were plenty of similar ones dotting the western capital; most of them seemed to have religious functions.

It’s not quite like the one we were in before, though.

There had been a chapel-like building on their visit last year, but this was different. Curious, Maomao followed Chue over.

She’d heard that chapels were something like shrines. *It certainly has the same somber atmosphere*, she thought as they entered. It was a simple hexagonal space, a single room. However, light poured through the windows, which were adorned with pictures made of colored glass, dappling the otherwise plain floor with beautiful colors. It did indeed leave Maomao with an indescribable feeling of wonder.

Chue seated herself in the very middle of the room and started mumbling something. Maomao sat beside her. She didn’t really know what was going on, but stayed quiet until Chue was done talking. Lihaku waited outside; the chapel would be a little crowded with all three of them in there.

“Phew...” After a moment, Chue looked up. Coming from her, this was all a little bit odd.

“Miss Chue, what were you doing there?” Maomao asked.

“I was using an old language from another country to ask, ‘O Lord, do You see us?’”

“I don’t get it. What’s that mean?”

“It’s a line from the holy text of a foreign religion. You know, there are lots of very pious believers in the western capital. If you can work in a line of scripture here or there while you’re chatting, it can do wonders for your business!”

Chue took some writing utensils from the folds of her robe and jotted something down. “Here, Miss Maomao. It looks like you’re going to be living here for the foreseeable future, so you might as well learn it.” On the paper, she had written the words she had been speaking, spelled out phonetically so that Maomao could read them.

“I really don’t think I need to.” Maomao couldn’t have cared less about this subject, and had no interest in learning these words.

“No, no. I think you should!” Chue didn’t back down; she gripped Maomao’s shoulders and looked her squarely in the eye. She wasn’t leaving the apothecary with much choice. “Here we go! One! Two! *O Lord, are You there, Lord?*”

“O L— Lard, arr you therre, Lard?”

“Hmm. You sound like a babbling baby.” Maomao thought she had said the words just the way Chue had written them, but apparently there was something wrong with her pronunciation. “Let’s try again!”

“Let’s not and say we did.”

“Come on! This is the perfect opportunity.” Chue was proving unusually stubborn.

When they’d repeated the phrase several times and Maomao’s diction had begun to improve, Chue finally let her go. While she was at it, she taught Maomao the proper gesture of prayer, although Maomao doubted how much good it would do her.

As they came out of the chapel, they caught Lihaku yawning. Bored, probably.

“I’m gonna give you a pop quiz on this the next time we come by,” Chue warned Maomao.

“Yeah, okay,” Maomao said. As far as she was concerned, there wasn’t going to be a next time. “Let’s go back for now and get some food, Miss Chue.” She was confident the subject of food would divert the ever-famished attendant. Chue liked to take her meals with Maomao in order to avoid her mother-in-law, and Maomao anticipated prompt agreement.

“Good idea. Mister Quack must be starving too. By the way, how is he attending to his bathroom needs?” Chue showed no shame in the question.

“I take him to the toilet whenever I’m there,” said Lihaku, who could carry the quack around in his arms.

“He should be fine. I left him with a bedpan. It’s for female use, so I think it should work for him,” Maomao replied, as unconcerned as Chue. The quack was a eunuch, so he lacked the distinguishing feature of most men.

“Gee, I suddenly feel bad for the old guy. Let’s get back, huh?” Lihaku said, picking up his pace. He really did look unusually concerned.

Chapter 3: Gyoku-ou's Children

When Maomao and the others got back to the medical office, they heard voices talking inside.

Is there a patient here? Maomao wondered. If the quack doctor was examining them, then she'd better get in there and trade off with him, quick. She opened the door.

"Hello, we're back," she said.

"Oh, hullo, young lady! Welcome back, everyone."

The doctor was chatting with a young man Maomao didn't recognize.

Who's this?

He was probably younger than Maomao, a smallish man with kind eyes. His face was attractive enough, but perhaps didn't look like much in the western capital, where there were brawny men to spare.

"Is this a patient?" Maomao asked.

"Oh, no. He's a visitor. He came to say a polite hello," the quack answered, his injured leg resting on a chair.

"You must pardon the intrusion," the small-built young man said, giving her a carefree smile. "And you must pardon me for failing to introduce myself sooner. My name is You Hulan, and I'll be serving the Moon Prince."

"Oh, I see. I'm Maomao." She met his polite bow with a deep one of her own.

"You," huh? That was a name she seemed to be hearing a lot lately.

"This young man, you see, he's supposed to serve the Moon Prince," the quack offered. "He's Master Gyoku-ou's son."

"Indeed. I'm still quite young; I beg your indulgence with me."

Gyoku-ou's son? Maomao tilted her head, perplexed. He seemed like the polar opposite of his father. Where was the resemblance?

Chue spared the boy only a brief dip of her head. Maybe she knew him already. "Master Gyoku-ou's honored son, you say?" she said.

"Yes, ma'am, his third and youngest. I never dreamed I would have the honor of serving the Moon Prince." Hulan was beaming.

Maomao had heard that Jinshi and Rikuson would each have one of Gyoku-ou's sons assigned to help them—one would get the second son, the other the third. This young man, however, was not quite what she'd been expecting, and she was a little taken aback.

I just figured he would be more…full of himself.

This was the son of the man who had attempted to use Jinshi like a pawn? At a glance, anyway, he looked perfectly humble. He was sipping tea with the quack doctor—a eunuch—and didn't hesitate to act polite to Maomao. He was nothing like she would have imagined. Certainly not the raging tempest of a man that might have been suggested by the name Hulan, which meant "tiger and wolf."

"My next-eldest brother is serving Master Rikuson. I do hope you'll look kindly upon each of us."

If the second son had been assigned to Rikuson, and the third to Jinshi, perhaps it was in deference to their respective ages.

I wouldn't be surprised if the second son is older than Jinshi. And when you had to order someone around, it made things easier if they were younger than you.

"I've come for more than just greetings today. I'm also here to offer my apologies," Hulan said.

"What for?"

"My nephew injured the master physician, and I am deeply sorry for that. He's still young, and as my father's first grandchild he's been rather spoiled. I will accept any punishment on his behalf, only please look generously upon my nephew."

Who the heck is this guy?

He sure didn't seem like Gyoku-ou's child. He had the deferential attitude of someone who had already spent decades as a buffer between a superior and their subordinates.

"Hulan was kind enough to bring snacks and wine. And it's so hard to get snacks these days! I can't thank him enough," the quack doctor said. He held up a basket of steamed buns. There were two bottles of wine beside it.

Well, now!

"This is special grape wine from the western capital, although I fear I don't know whether it will be to your taste. In hopes of finding something you'd enjoy, I brought two varieties—one more

alcoholic and one less."

What an excellent choice of gift. Maomao felt an urge to cling to the wine bottles, but resisted.

"Now, then. If you'll excuse me, I must get back to work," Hulan said.

"Oh, please, stay a moment longer, Hulan. You're still young, and youth should take its time to relax," said the quack, who by now had adopted an air of total informality with the young man.

"I'm afraid I couldn't. My uncles and aunts told me to make sure I studied diligently at the foot of the Moon Prince. I'll work as hard as I can to catch up to everyone else, and meanwhile, I do hope you'll look favorably on me."

Hulan gave another elaborate bow and left the office.

"I have to say, I don't see any wolf in him," Maomao remarked. The tiger and the wolf of Hulan's name suggested someone greedy and violent; it was a strong name, yes, but not a very *good* one.

"Yeah. He seems more like a loyal mutt," Lihaku added, and Maomao agreed with him completely.

After Hulan had left, the quack told them about Gyoku-ou's children.

"They say Master Gyoku-ou had four children. Young Hulan is the youngest of them."

Maomao and the others lost no time turning Hulan's gift of steamed buns into their snack.

Got to make sure there's nothing in them, Maomao thought, her old habit of checking food for poison rearing its head. They were filled with meat, and she was perfectly happy to make them her lunch. She was only sorry she couldn't have the wine with them—but she was on duty, after all.

"The oldest is twenty-five, and then the rest of the children were born in successive years—except Hulan; he's a little younger. About eighteen. Isn't that right, Miss Chue?" the quack asked as he poured tea into some cups.

"Oh, yes, very right. Master Gyoku-ou's children go: eldest son, eldest daughter, second son, and then the third son bringing up the rear at eighteen years old."

Chue was putting out some soup she'd reheated. Maomao took a bowl and passed it to Lihaku, who stood slightly apart from the quack doctor. The quack prepared the tea without getting up, while

Lihaku was as vigilant as ever. After spending more than six months in each other's company, each knew their role.

"That's an odd collection. Do they perchance have different mothers?" Maomao asked, sitting in a chair and breaking open a bun. The filling spilled out, meat and mushrooms and bamboo shoots.

"Not at all. Unlike his father, Master Gyoku-ou only had one wife."

"Huh! That is quite different from Master Gyokuen," the quack said, sounding surprised. It wasn't unusual for men in Li to have more than one wife, but eleven was enough to make Gyokuen the subject of talk. Even the Emperor only had enough wives to count on one hand. Yes, there were two thousand consorts and ladies in the rear palace, but between considerations of family background and resources, they weren't necessarily all people His Majesty could easily take to bed.

Lihaku spoke up. "You know, I heard a rumor. About Master Gyoku-ou's wife." His ears and mouth were participating in the conversation, but his eyes continued to scan the area outside the medical office.

"What kind of rumor?" Maomao, having carefully studied the bun, now popped it into her mouth. The seasonings were characteristic of the central region, and she was surprised to realize it made her a little bit homesick.

"I heard she's always had good business sense, that she used to be a real go-getter. After the birth of their second son, she boarded a foreign trading vessel for a business venture, except it was involved in a shipwreck. Unluckily for her, things weren't very good in the country where she wound up, and she had to stay there for several years."

"That's quite a story. I'd expect to *see* more of someone like that, though," said Maomao. So far, she hadn't seen Gyoku-ou's wife even once. She'd assumed that meant she was just a chaste, retiring woman who spent her time supporting her husband, but it seemed strange that Maomao hadn't so much as seen her face since Gyoku-ou's death.

Chue picked up the story. "She came back years later, but rumor has it she wasn't the same woman. She'd become someone who supported her husband from the shadows, where nobody would see her. I'm sure a lot happened to her in those farmlands."

When Maomao looked closely, she saw Chue's plate, and hers only, had one extra bun on it. She would have to watch out for her.

"Do you think that played into why Master Gyoku-ou hated foreigners so much?" Maomao asked.

"Who can say? We'll sure never know now." Chue didn't sound very interested, happily munching on a steamed bun instead.

Lihaku had returned to his food as well, apparently having shared everything he knew about the wife. Maomao didn't have any follow-up questions to speak of either.

"You know, wasn't that girl you examined Master Gyoku-ou's granddaughter?" the quack asked.

"That's right. His oldest daughter's daughter."

The girl had developed an intestinal blockage because of her habit of eating her own hair. Tianyu had performed the surgery, but Maomao had attended to her care after that. The stitches had already come out cleanly.

"It must have hurt so much, having her stomach cut open. How's the wound? Is it all right now?" the quack asked, his brow furrowed in genuine concern.

You can hardly even tell it was there, Maomao thought. She hated to admit it, but Tianyu was an excellent surgeon. Maybe you *had* to be a little crazy to be so good; heaven, the saying went, did not give two gifts to one person.

"Yes, it's much better," Maomao said. "I visit her periodically to check on the progress of the scar, but that's all. In fact, I'm going tomorrow."

Treatment was coming along nicely. She wished a certain abdomen-scorching noble would be such a good patient.

"Oh? That's good, that's good. I'm glad to hear it." The quack looked relieved; Maomao, though, thought he should worry more about his own leg.

Chapter 4: The Sheltered Wife

The next day, Maomao went to see Gyoku-ou's granddaughter, just as she'd told the quack doctor she would.

What was her name again?

Maomao, as we've established, was not excellent at remembering people's names. But she got by okay, so it was fine—right?

As so often, Lihaku and Chue were with her. And one more person...

"Oh, please, don't mind me."

For some reason Gyoku-ou's third son, Hulan, was there too.

"I just thought I might tag along. I like to see my elder sister and my niece once in a while."

Gee, and here I thought your honor was serving the Moon Prince.

"Are you sure you don't need to work?" she asked, careful not to let her skepticism show on her face.

"You needn't worry—this doubles as work. I thought it would be a good chance to ask for some details about the job my father was doing."

"You're going to have a chat with your sister?" That didn't sound like work to Maomao. She gave him a quizzical look.

"No, my mother. She lives with my sister; she says there's too much commotion at the main house for her."

Ah, the much-discussed mother.

So she retired from the "main stage," but was still supporting Gyoku-ou in the background. It would make sense, then, to ask her about his business.

At the entryway to the house, they were greeted by the young patient and her mother, as well as a woman somewhere past forty.

Is that Hulan's mother? Maomao wondered. She'd visited this house several times, but this was the first she'd seen of her. Maybe she was there waiting, not for Maomao and her band, but for Hulan. *I think I'll call her Hu's Mom for the time being.*

She didn't know if Hulan was even going to introduce them, but

if he did, knowing how rarely she was likely to encounter this woman left Maomao without much desire to remember her name. In the same vein, she dubbed Hulan's older sister "Hu's Sis." She did indeed resemble Hu's Mom, as one might expect of a mother and daughter, but Hu's Mom possessed a beauty of a kind that might make a person possessive. No doubt she had been a popular woman in her younger years.

"Mother, Sister," Hulan said, bowing deeply to each of them. "It's been much too long."

"Yes. Too long indeed," Hu's Mom said, and then she looked at Maomao and the others and slowly dipped her head.

Her features resembled those of Hu's Sis, but she had a retiring quality and a calmness in her eyes. Physically, her eyes were more downturned than her daughter's, but she exuded a unique loveliness.

"Hulan, I think that's enough of a greeting when we have visitors." She turned to Maomao and her group. "You must accept my apologies for my son's thoughtlessness."

Apparently this was where Hulan got his modesty. Her voice was as reserved as her appearance.

"Not at all," Maomao said, then glanced at the granddaughter. "If I may, perhaps I could examine the patient's scar now?"

"Yes, please do take good care of Xiaohong."

The girl gave her best bow. Xiaohong, "little red," was presumably a pet name, but Maomao had never heard her actual name.

She looked quite different now from how she had before; her hair, once dark, was now mostly light, and evenly trimmed. The roots were a light brown that verged on golden, while the ends were still black, giving the impression of a brush that had been dipped in ink.

"All right, I'll see you later," said Hulan. He and his mother would hold their own conference while Maomao did her exam.

Maomao and the others entered the room where she always did her exams. Well, maybe "exam" was a strong word. Mostly she just inspected the scar, then applied some salve in hopes that it wouldn't be too visible in the long run.

There were no servants in the house. The scar on her abdomen might not have been very obvious, but the family didn't want it to

be public knowledge that the girl had had surgery. If the scar vanished more or less entirely by the time she was grown up, that would be the best of all worlds.

"I'm finished for today. If you find you need more salve, please don't hesitate to come to the medical office and I'll prepare some. But common stuff from the market would be fine too."

"Thank you so much," Hu's Sis said, bowing deeply.

Although it wasn't really that kind of visit, she'd set out tea and snacks on a table. Chue's eyes gleamed as if to say *Let's have a bite before we go home.*

"Hulan isn't back yet, anyway. Why don't we take it easy?"

"I don't think there's any special need for us to wait for Master Hulan to leave," Maomao said. What were they, a bunch of adolescent girls who had to do everything as a group? They had Lihaku there as a bodyguard; it would be fine.

"Miss Maomao, are you telling poor, starving Miss Chue to walk right past these beautiful, delicious-looking treats and not eat them?"

"Go ahead and eat them, Miss Chue."

"Woo-hoo! I knew you were one of the good ones, Miss Maomao. I could kiss you!" She came at Maomao with her lips puckered, but Maomao shoved her away. "Aww, don't be like that!" Chue said.

"Uh-huh," Maomao said, and set a glass of milk tea in front of Chue. Chue promptly mixed in some honey and stuffed a baked treat into her face. It was a cookie with dried grapes and walnuts worked into it; it smelled richly of butter. Maybe there was wheat germ in there, because the color was pale, but it would be very nutritious. It was certainly enough to pass for a luxurious indulgence with ingredients so hard to come by.

Maomao nibbled on one of the cookies herself. As for Lihaku, he had his guard duties to think of; he only stared intently at the sumptuous-looking treats. Yes, he was doing his job, but Maomao still felt a little bad for him.

"Ahem, excuse me?" Maomao said to Hu's Sis.

"Yes? What is it?"

"Would it be possible to take a few of these cookies back with us?"

A souvenir for the quack doctor.

Maomao worried that maybe she was out of line, but Hu's Sis

smiled faintly and nodded. She no longer seemed on edge the way she had when they first met; in fact, she seemed very collected. “Very well,” she said. “I’ll get some for you right away.”

Just as she was about to leave the room, Xiaohong tugged on her sleeve. “I can get them.” Xiaohong went out, looking happy—she, like her mother, seemed to be feeling much better than before.

Chue watched the mother and child with a smile as she munched on her snack. Maybe she was silently willing them to bring back lots and lots of goodies for them.

“I gather the lady of the house is staying with you,” Maomao said. If there had been nothing to talk about, she would have stayed silent, but since she had a subject she could bring up, she did. Hu’s Sis had been kind enough to give them these treats; Maomao wanted to repay her by trying to be at least somewhat sociable.

“Yes, that’s true. She feels there’s rather too much commotion at the main house, so she lives here instead. Although she’s also worried about Xiaohong.”

This was Hu’s Sis’s own mother they were talking about, yet somehow she didn’t look entirely happy.

Maybe the two of them don’t get along? Maomao wondered—and that was when they heard the “Eek!” from outside.

Hu’s Sis jumped up and rushed out of the room, Maomao and the others following close behind.

The shout had come from Xiaohong, who was in the garden of the mansion with someone pulling on her hair. Namely...

That obnoxious brat?!

The little monster, Gyoku-whatever-it-was, was pulling Xiaohong’s hair. His minder was nearby, but she only looked on apprehensively and gave no sign of trying to stop him.

“Gyokujun! What in the world are you doing?!” Hu’s Sis ran over to separate Xiaohong and the little monster—er, Gyokujun. She stood protectively in front of her daughter and glared at her nephew.

Gyokujun, meanwhile, tossed aside a few stray strands of Xiaohong’s hair that had gotten wrapped around his fingers. “What was I doing? I was just trying to help her get rid of that filthy hair.” He didn’t sound like he felt the least bit guilty. In his left hand he held a mud ball that he was preparing to smash into Xiaohong’s hair.

“It is not filthy!” Xiaohong sniffled.

Hu's Sis looked somewhat uncomfortable, even though she was defending her own daughter. "*Xiaohong* is not filthy," she said. "She's your cousin."

"Cousin? But her hair, it looks like an outlander's hair!"

"That's just how it happens to look. There are lots of people in the western capital with light hair—you know that." Hu's Sis was acting very calm with her not even ten-year-old nephew, but it was obvious she was working hard to control herself.

"But Auntie, you used to throw stones at outlanders when you saw them! My father told me so." Gyokujun was scowling.

Xiaohong studied her mother's expression; Hu's Sis looked even more uncomfortable than before.

Ahh. She remembered, Maomao realized. Gyokujun was doing things that Hu's Sis had once done herself.

You can't change the past, so it only makes you feel more and more guilty.

"No, don't!"

Gyokujun had chosen that moment to let fly with his mud cake.

But it never left his hand. "All right, that's enough pranks." Chue had stopped his small fist cold.

When did she...

Chue had gotten behind Gyokujun in the blink of an eye.

"Hey! What d'you think you're doing?!"

"Now, now. Water is a precious resource here. Just think how hard it would be to wash if someone got all messy with something like this." Chue smiled pleasantly as she crushed Gyokujun's hand, mud ball and all. It must have hurt, because when she finally released him, his face twisted and he rubbed his hand.

"What d'you think you're doing? Do you know who I am?!" Gyokujun demanded, tears threatening to form in his eyes.

"I certainly do. You're Master Gyokuen's great-grandchild, Master Gyoku-ou's grandchild, Master Shikyou's eldest son, the honorable Master Gyokujun."

"Well, if you know all that, then—"

"However!" Chue continued. "They say a woman's hair is her very life. I don't know if *that's* true exactly, but I can guarantee that acting this way won't make you popular with the ladies for one second!"

Chue looked at the hair-pulling victim, Xiaohong, who was hiding behind her mother with tears in her eyes and sniffling.

Lihaku kept a respectful distance; as a bodyguard, he couldn't get too far from Maomao and the others, but he showed no sign of intervening. He seemed to consider this just a spat between two kids. Maomao took the same tack; Chue was handling this, and she wasn't going to gang up on some kid. Having said that, Gyokujun still didn't look like he had learned anything from this moment, and Maomao's impression of him as a little beast only grew.

"Huh, fine. I don't care about her dumb hair. But did you know they were dyeing it all this time? That proves she's an outlander. She's an outlander changeling who's here to hurt our family."

"Changeling?" Maomao cocked her head. She hadn't meant to jump into the conversation, but it was such an unfamiliar word that she'd opened her mouth before she could stop herself.

"A changeling is a child born to fairies or the like and then swapped with a human child," Chue explained helpfully.

"Just look at her! You can tell," Gyokujun said. "Both her parents have black hair. But *hers* is...like that! Anyone can see there's something wrong with her. They say she's my cousin, but that's a lie!"

So a changeling is like a "devil's child"? The term referred to a child who didn't resemble her parents; as the expression suggested, it was considered an ill omen.

In any case, there was something Maomao felt obliged to correct. "Two parents with black hair can still have a child with a different hair color, you know. It's like how some cats might be black and white while their siblings are striped, even if they come from the same litter."

Maomao thought she was putting it in a way that a child could understand, but the little monster called Gyokujun wasn't even remotely listening. Maomao glared at the lady-in-waiting who was supposed to be watching him, willing her to do something, but the woman only looked away.

He hasn't learned a thing since he injured the quack doctor.

She thought a good whack would be the quickest way to administer a lesson, but when she glanced back again, she found Chue talking to the boy.

"Master Gyokujun," Chue said. "Are you very important?" She wore her usual indolent smile and clapped her hands a couple of times to brush the mud off them.

"You better believe I am! For I am Gyokujun!"

“Yes, I know. So, *why* are you important?”

“Because I’m the oldest son of the oldest son of this house. Someday I will lead the western capital.”

“So you’re important because you’re Master Shikyou’s child?”

“That’s right!” Gyokujun puffed out his chest.

Nothing like borrowing daddy’s authority.

It was one major reason Hu’s Sis couldn’t take a firmer hand with Gyokujun. Maomao glanced at Xiaohong’s head as she clung to her mother. The woman must have heeded Maomao’s warning to stop dyeing the girl’s hair, because there was a good stretch of light color there now. But there were specks of blood by the roots; that must have been a pretty good pull. Maomao felt any possible sympathy for Gyokujun wither and die.

“All right, next question,” Maomao said, taking over from Chue. “Why is Master Shikyou important?” Chue stepped back, allowing her to lead the conversation.

“That’s because he’s Grandpa’s son...”

“Oh, I see, I see.” Maomao’s lips twisted. “Even though Master Gyoku-ou is gone now?” By this point she was grinning outright.

It was not a very nice way to put the matter to a child. She was using the words like a blade to eviscerate him.

Gyokujun’s face went blank. Whatever the central government might or might not have thought of Gyoku-ou, there were many who loved and admired him in the western capital, and to speak of his death here was perhaps not the smartest move.

Maomao knew it was petty and mean, but she was determined not to feel any remorse. Xiaohong’s mother couldn’t say anything, so *she* would.

“Master Shikyou is still around, I guess. But I hear he lives quite at his leisure. Do you still believe he’ll ultimately lead the western capital? Or are you saying *you’re* the appropriate instrument to rule this place?” Again, a harsh way to speak to a child not yet ten years old—but she wanted him to get this through his head. “Are *you yourself* important?” she asked.

If no one ever disciplined an obnoxious brat like this his entire life, he was never going to grow up to become a decent politician. If he coasted along, learning nothing, on the assumption that his bloodline would land him in the same position as his father, he would eventually be sorely disappointed.

Gyokujun paled before her eyes. Maybe he was beginning to

understand, in his own childish way. He might be descended from the son and grandson of the undisputed most powerful man in the western capital, but even the most powerful protectors could die at any time—and a child with no protector would end up as a puppet at best, banished at worst.

"M-My dad would never die!" Gyokujun exclaimed.

"Nobody knows when they're going to die; that's what it means to be human. Now, you don't mind if I treat Lady Xiaohong's head, do you?"

Maomao took Xiaohong by the hand, intending to lead her back to the room, but a clear, commanding voice said, "Wait just a minute!" Maomao turned to find a middle-aged woman standing there—Hu's Mom.

"Grandma!" Gyokujun cried and hugged his grandmother, clinging to her. Hulan was there too, just behind her. "These people! These people, they said the worst things!" Gyokujun said, clutching his grandma with his muddy hands. There was no trace of the smart-ass from moments before; now he was all sweet grandchild.

Hulan smiled wryly at his nephew's antics, then put his hands together in a gesture of apology to Maomao and the others.

As for Hu's Mom, she looked down at Gyokujun, then at Maomao, then let her gaze drift over Hu's Sis and Xiaohong before it finally settled on Chue. "There was quite a bit of commotion out here. Whatever is going on?" she asked, her voice gentle to placate her grandson.

"They said... They said father is going to die!" Gyokujun yelped.

Dumb kid. Twisting what they'd said so that it wouldn't look like it was his fault.

Hu's Mom's face darkened, and she shot a glance at Hulan to see his face. Hulan didn't say a word, but it was clear from his expression that he didn't intend to serve as his nephew's ally.

"Gyokujun. Is this true?" Hu's Mom asked.

"Of course it is!"

"Really?"

"Y-Yes..."

"I was watching the whole time, you know."

At that remark from his grandmother, Gyokujun's expression did another flip. He turned to his uncle, Hulan, but the young man made no move to help him.

Kid's a master of the quick change, huh? The boy had yet to develop his uncle's force of personality.

"What were you doing to Xiaohong? Why are your hands all muddy?"

"Uh, it was all a...a misunderstanding..." Gyokujun started to stumble through an excuse, but if they had seen the whole thing, there was really no point. At the same time, though, Maomao started to sweat too.

A few seconds later, Hu's Mom gave an exasperated sigh. "Gyokujun, go back to your room. Take him, please," she said to the lady-in-waiting. The attendant led him off, although he didn't neglect to stick his tongue out over his shoulder as he went.

"You must forgive such rudeness in front of our visitors," Hu's Mom said, bowing to Maomao and Lihaku in turn. She seemed to understand that her grandchild was a bit of a lout. Maomao had worried she might get a piece of the woman's mind for bringing up Gyoku-ou's death, but Hu's Mom didn't say anything about it.

Instead she turned to Hu's Sis and Xiaohong. "Xiaohong, would you come here for a moment?"

Xiaohong left her hiding place behind Hu's Sis and went over to her grandmother. Hu's Mom began to run a comb through Xiaohong's hair. "It doesn't look too bad. I'll give Gyokujun a serious talking-to later."

"Mother!" Hu's Sis said, indignant.

"Yes?"

"That's it? You know how cruel Gyokujun can be to Xiaohong—so why did you bring him here?"

She brought him?

Ordinarily, Gyokujun would be in the main house. Maomao could see why Hu's Sis wouldn't want her mother deliberately bringing her nephew here when they both knew what he would do to her daughter.

"Things aren't easy for Gyokujun at the main house, you know. I wish you would understand that."

"*Understand* that!"

"His mother can't protect him by herself. What else are we supposed to do?"

What's this about his mother? She can't protect him?

His mother, presumably, was the woman who had come to apologize for Gyokujun injuring the quack the other day. The one

who had tried to force Gyokujun's head down, weeping herself the whole time. One heard much talk of Gyoku-ou's no-account eldest son, but one didn't hear nearly as much about his bride.

"This isn't the time. We still have visitors," Hu's Mom said.

Not the time? Maomao understood what she was saying, but didn't much like the way she said it. Hu's Sis bit her lip and glared at Hu's Mom.

Hu's Mom simply walked away as if nothing had happened. Hulan followed, bowing to them as he went. Hu's Sis had an uneasy smile on her face; in spite of all that had happened, she seemed to want to put on a brave front for Maomao and her companions.

"I'm sorry you had to see that. Shall we go back?" she asked. It was clear how much effort she was expending.

"U-Um..." Xiaohong sniffled and tugged on Maomao's skirt. "Please don't talk bad about Grandpa."

Gyoku-ou wasn't just Gyokujun's grandfather—he was Xiaohong's too.

After a second, Maomao said, "You're right. I'm sorry." She had to admit that she had been wrong this time, and apologizing was the right thing to do.

Chapter 5: Third Son, Second Son, Eldest Son

Hulan's work often brought him into the orbit of Maomao and her companions.

"I'm terribly sorry, but perhaps I could ask you to arrange a carriage for me?" he asked a servant in a hallway of the main house. The servants seemed used to Hulan's humble demeanor; apparently it wasn't just an act he put on for Jinshi.

"You think he's really Master Gyoku-ou's son?" Lihaku asked, squinting as he watched Hulan walk down the hall. The hulking soldier had a hoe in hand and was working a field. It was no longer just the annex; they had received permission to turn the garden of the main house into farming fields as well, and Lahan's Brother had wasted no time beginning cultivation. Lihaku helped, on the grounds that just standing around as a guard would cause him to go soft and this work doubled as exercise.

Then there was the main house's gardener, watching the field come together with tears in his eyes. The greenhouse gardener was giving him a sympathetic pat on the shoulder. Maomao was no longer the gardeners' only enemy.

"Plenty of kids are nothing like their parents," said Maomao. She was drying cucumber slices in the sun. The greenhouse gardener was glaring especially hard at her, but she contrived not to notice.

With Gyoku-ou gone, the political face of the western capital had changed substantially. With Jinshi now taking a more public role, the move toward military expansion was much slower, and the main focus of attention had become how to stabilize the food supply.

The hated grasshoppers had assailed the western capital repeatedly in the past several months. Humans, however, can get used to almost anything, and as the episodes went on, they learned to live with the insects.

They're growing numb, Maomao thought. Still, whenever she saw a grasshopper, she tried to kill it, and it sounded like the people were trying to plow the areas where grasshoppers seemed likely to lay eggs. There was even a suggestion that the plains should be torched while the larvae were still young and couldn't fly, but unlike in the royal capital, there was scant rain here and no way to know how far the fire might spread. It was deemed too dangerous.

Instead, a simple battle of attrition proceeded. Cultivation of fields went on, complete with "fall plowing." The past months had seen a number of merchants go out of business, and priority was given to hiring them.

I wonder how much we can actually harvest before winter.

That would be the real question, Maomao suspected. She touched each of the cucumber slices, picking up the ones that were dry. That was when she saw someone rushing through the hall of the mansion.

"Lady Maomao!" It was Hulan. Maomao always felt weird being addressed with such high respect. "And Master Lihaku. You must pardon me."

"Oh, you're Master Hulan, aren't you? You don't have to use a title of respect with me; I'm just a bodyguard. In fact, it makes things a little awkward."

Ah, Lihaku, always saying exactly what Maomao wished she could.

"Not at all. I'm still not much more than a glorified gofer, and I know all too little about politics. I know all too little about anything, really. Meanwhile I hear that Lady Maomao, a woman, has already served as a medical assistant for some years now. And you, Master Lihaku, I gather you're here by the personal request of the Moon Prince. You are certainly both worthy of respect, and it would never do to be rude to you. Above all, I myself am nothing more than a lackey, not even an official in my own right. I can do no other than show you courtesy; please understand."

Hulan was practically snorting with certainty, and his eyes were truly shining; if this was an act, he was doing a very good job.

It's going to be way too much work to get him to stop, Maomao thought, so she decided to live with it.

"All right, Master Hulan. Did you need something from us?" she asked.

"Yes, ma'am. I've brought a paper from the Moon Prince. I

intend to give the same one to Dr. You and Dr. Li. He seeks the opinion of those doing medical treatment here. Would you be so kind as to look at this?"

He passed Maomao a sheet of parchment, which she opened and inspected. The text was written in pen—the western equivalent of a brush—but it wasn't Jinshi's handwriting. It had clearly been written by someone used to handling a pen, presumably someone from the west. Maybe Hulan had written it out himself.

It was a list of symptoms.

Swelling, bleeding, anemia, diarrhea, vomiting...

"These are symptoms observed in the areas where there are no doctors or apothecaries. The Moon Prince realizes you might not be able to treat these things from afar, but if there are ways to prevent them or cope with them, he requests that you write them down in as much detail as possible."

It was hardly unusual for there to be no doctors or apothecaries out in the country. When people in those areas got sick, they treated their problems with folk remedies, and in especially serious cases, the sufferer might go to a folk healer to have prayers said, but that was the extent of what people could do. There was no proper medical treatment available.

"You should make your instructions as specific as you can. Moreover, resources are limited, so the Moon Prince would be grateful if you would suggest possible substitutes. Whatever one seeks in I-sei Province these days, one can assume it will be in short supply."

That was true enough, Maomao agreed. But they were asking for more than she could simply jot down right here and give back to him. "I'll see that the master physician gets this. Could we have a little while to work on it? I think he should be done by this evening." She stuck to the pretense that the quack doctor would fill out the paper. "We just need to give it to the Moon Prince, yes?"

"No, I'll come by again this evening to collect it."

"I really don't think you need to worry about it..." She suggested that she might give it to Chue when she inevitably came passing through.

"No, I'd like to see it for myself," Hulan said firmly. "To be quite honest, this was my suggestion, so I'd like to be certain."

"I see."

Quick thinking. Maomao was impressed. She might have known

that a wife renowned for her own capabilities would raise a son fit to be someone's aide. But not more than an aide.

"In addition, if I may ask, is there anything to be careful of in regions where there are no official medical personnel?" Hulan asked.

"That's a big question," Maomao replied, crossing her arms and thinking. "Places without doctors have a tendency to be dominated by superstition. Sometimes, folk healers regard medical personnel as a nuisance and will actually chase them away."

Maomao pictured someone who had experienced that firsthand: Kokuyou, the man with the half-bandaged face.

"Also, when the body is weakened, there can be outbreaks of communicable diseases. Keep an eye on the health of any of the personnel near those areas to make sure they aren't unwittingly carrying a disease."

"Understood," Hulan said.

Maomao had a few more ideas, but she could write them down in detail later.

"All right. I appreciate you taking the time," Hulan said, and with another bow, he left.

"Boy, they *really* don't resemble each other," Lihaku said.

"Not a bit," Maomao agreed.

So Gyoku-ou's third son, Hulan, didn't resemble his father. What then of the second son? He, too, was different, in his own way.

With his fastidious outfit, the second son, Feilong, looked every inch the bureaucrat. Unlike Hulan, his presence could be somewhat imposing. If anything, he most resembled Gyoku-ou's oldest daughter in that respect.

The main house and the administrative office sat next door to each other; there was even a hallway connecting the two. So although Feilong spent most of his time in the administrative building, Maomao spotted him every once in a while.

Feilong was officially assigned to Rikuson, but he often came to bring papers to Jinshi. Maybe that was a bit of kindness on Rikuson's part, giving Feilong a chance to see and be seen by a member of the Imperial family. Or maybe he just wanted to foist that much work on Jinshi. Maomao didn't know.

"I've brought some papers, sir," Feilong said, appearing during

one of their exams.

Maomao pulled the quack doctor back so he wouldn't get in the way. Even as he greeted Jinshi politely, Feilong gave the papers to Jinshi's aide, Basen. The pile was separated into three parts by dividers.

"The red divider is new business, the blue one is items which warrant reconsideration, and the yellow signifies formerly rejected proposals that have been revised."

Huh, not bad.

Feilong was quite a capable man in his own right. Polite and proper though he was, however, there was no warmth to him. That, too, differentiated him from his father. Maybe Gyoku-ou had concerned himself mostly with his oldest son because the other two had each fallen farther from the tree.

They look similar enough, but it's the attitude. Feilong and Hulan were both perfectly competent, but had the distinct air of bureaucrats. That was well and good, since they were training to be aides at the moment, but picturing either of them ultimately standing astride the western capital as its leader—well, it made one shake one's head. *Jinshi seemed like he was planning to go home as soon as possible once their political instruction was over, but I don't know.*

At this rate, it looked like they might be here for years to come.

Speaking of Gyoku-ou's sons, the eldest showed up surprisingly quickly.

Maomao heard Gyokujun's joyous cry outside her window. "Father! Father, Father!"

She looked out to see father and son in the garden—or perhaps we should say the former garden, since half of it had been converted to farmland.

So this was the man that brat—er, Gyokujun—was so attached to. He had hair scruffy enough to make a lion proud, and tanned, rugged limbs. Around his hips he wore the pelt of a deer he had presumably killed himself.

Wow, they look just like each other.

The newcomer looked exactly like Gyoku-ou if someone had turned back the clock to his younger days. The lady-in-waiting with Gyokujun looked positively anxious. The boy's mother was nowhere to be seen. Maomao was given to understand that it had been a

political marriage; maybe husband and wife didn't get along that well.

The best thing I can do is stay out of it, she thought—but she was at least interested enough to steal a glance out the window. The quack and Lihaku felt the same way; they joined her.

"That's my boy! Have you been good? Of course you have. Here's a gift!" The man gave Gyokujun a heaving sack. Excited, the boy looked inside—but the moment he did so, he burst into tears.

What's in there? Maomao wondered.

She soon found out, for tumbling out of the bag came a deer's head. Yes, maybe that was a bit too stimulating for a child's gift.

"Ha ha ha!" the eldest son laughed. "Say hello to tonight's dinner!"

"W-We're going to *eat* this?!" Gyokujun exclaimed through the tears and snot. Just when he looked like he was getting it under control, he burst out crying again.

"Sorry! I'm sorry. Come on, don't cry. Hey, it looks like a lot happened while I was away. What's going on?"

Gyokujun whispered in his father's ear and pointed toward the medical office. His attendant paled.

I've got a bad feeling about this.

And she was right: the eldest son soon appeared at the medical office.

"Can we help you?" Lihaku asked, standing squarely in the man's way. He was usually so affable, but at this moment he had put on his best soldier's glare.

"My son told me all about you. He said the visitors from the central region have really been throwing their weight around. I thought I'd come say hello to you myself."

Gyokujun, hiding in his father's shadow, stuck out his tongue at them.

That little shit!

Maomao scowled at him; if she had ever wondered whether he might have learned his lesson, she certainly didn't now. The quack had tucked himself into a corner of the office, openly terrified.

"I sincerely apologize if we seem to have been throwing our weight around," Lihaku began. "However, that insect swarm ravaged the western capital, and we're groping around trying to find something, anything, to help make things better. Or would you prefer that visitors not do anything to help, but only stand by, eat

your food, and watch?"

Lihaku was a good 190 centimeters tall, maybe even a little more. He had some six centimeters or so on Gyoku-ou's son, although the other man was still plenty burly. No wonder a diminutive eunuch like the quack doctor was afraid.

As for Maomao, she was looking around and pondering, hoping for an opening to knock some sense into the little shit.

If things get physical here, it'll only waste what little medicine and supplies we have left.

She gave Lihaku a look, pleading with him that if they were going to start throwing punches, they should do so outside.

"Hah! You government bigwigs are something else, you know that? Even I know I have to watch my mouth around the real nobles—but now even their lackeys think they can push me around? How am I supposed to hold my head up? Eh?"

"Surely you jest, sir. I'm only a soldier myself—an underling, as you say. All I do is follow my orders. Now, this is the physician's office. If you'd still like to talk, perhaps we could do it outside?"

Perfect! Nice work, Maomao thought. More than anything, she wanted to avoid the medical office ending up in shambles. Lihaku understood that and was trying to move the encounter outdoors. If the son decided to throw down with him, well, Lihaku could probably hold his own at least for a while. Long enough for Maomao to run and call someone.

I guess the ideal outcome is that they don't fight, she thought, but the situation looked like it was ready to explode at any moment. *Lihaku understands his position.* He was a bodyguard, and if the eldest son decided to turn violent, he would respond in kind to protect Maomao and the quack. But he would understand that he couldn't throw the first punch.

As for the little shit who was the cause of the dispute...

He's quaking!

Gyokujun was clinging to his lady-in-waiting. Unfortunately for him, he couldn't go after the quack doctor like he had before—there were two guards aside from Lihaku standing there.

If he starts anything, those guards will turn him into a punching bag.

The thought had hardly crossed her mind, however, when someone came rushing up.

"Shikyou! Brother!"

It was Hulan. The eldest son's name, Shikyou, was actually

another word for “owl,” and like Hulan’s own name, the connotations were not very positive.

Something else suddenly struck Maomao: *His name doesn’t include* Gyoku*?*

“Brother, what are you doing?” Hulan asked.

“What does it look like I’m doing? I hear our visitors are too big for their britches! That they treat the members of our household like their servants!”

Servants, huh?

True, Gyoku-ou’s second and third sons had become aides, and from a certain perspective it might look like they were being put to menial uses. Maybe it wasn’t just the little shit Gyokujun; maybe some of the actual servants of the household had their grievances with the people who had come from the royal capital.

“Please, Brother, make sure you hear all sides before you do anything rash. Are you sure you’re not just swallowing what Gyokujun says wholesale?”

“Why, I was just here trying to find out the truth, and they asked me to step outside!”

Whoa, hey, uh-uh!

The son had obviously been looking for a fight from the moment the conversation started. Even Lihaku seemed unsure how to respond.

“Brother Feilong and I are learning from the Moon Prince at our own request,” Hulan said.

“Really?”

“Moreover, it was Jun who was offensive toward our visitors.”

“Hoh...” Suddenly Shikyou’s glare settled on his son. Gyokujun tried to make himself smaller, tearing up once again.

Maomao seized her chance and stepped forward. “He injured the honored physician here. The poor man was unable to walk for several days.”

“Is that true, Gyokujun?” Shikyou was giving the boy a really hard look now.

“I... I just...”

“I’m not interested in excuses,” Shikyou said, his voice like the low growl of a beast. In his corner of the room, the quack doctor commenced quivering.

Gyokujun simply nodded.

Shikyou scratched the back of his neck, exasperated, and then

he grabbed the gift for his son and brought it over.

"Here."

The sack with the deer head flopped at Lihaku's feet, spilling its contents. The deer's glassy eyes stared vacantly at the sky.

"I'm sorry for my son's disrespect. Take this as repayment, if you'd be so kind."

With that, Shikyou left.

I guess there was something to those stories about him, Maomao thought. The word that came to mind was *ruffian*.

"I'm sorry. It seems my brother caused a great deal of trouble," Hulan said.

"Don't apologize. You saved our necks," Maomao said gratefully.

The quack doctor hesitantly emerged from his corner, looking around as if to make sure everything was quite all right.

"Once he realizes his own father won't even back him up, I expect Gyokujun will start to behave a little better," Hulan said.

"I can only hope so," Maomao replied. As far as she was concerned, the kid showed no sign of having learned anything from his recent travails. She strongly suspected he was going to try something again. Then she looked at the reeking sack and asked, "By the way, how are you supposed to eat this thing?" She was glad enough to have it, she supposed, but as an ingredient, she wasn't sure what to do with it.

"Hmm. Sometimes people stew them to make soup stock, or boil the brains and eat those. Some people also carefully remove the skin and make a decoration of it, if they have a taste for that sort of thing."

Unfortunately for them, they had nowhere to display a deer's head.

"The brains, huh? I have to admit, I'm curious."

An unknown ingredient? She had to try it!

"You'd eat its brains?!" the quack exclaimed, looking at her incredulously.

"We might as well. This head's ours now."

"I'm not sure I want...any brains..." The quack doctor drew back.

"Just a small taste for me," Lihaku said, not looking very eager either.

Maomao regarded the glassy-eyed head and wished that

Shikyou had at least given them the antlers as well. Velvet antler could be turned into an excellent energy tonic.

Chapter 6: The Winery

Ten days after they had moved to the main house, Chue paid Maomao a visit at the medical office.

"Miss Maomao, Miss Maomao!"

"Miss Chue, Miss Chue, what is it? You seem even happier than usual today."

Maomao was using a pair of scissors to cut up a large cloth—an old sheet that would soon be new bandages.

"Oh, I am! As a matter of fact, we've been given permission to go out!"

"Lucky us."

"Yes, and so, here's a riddle: What reason might be behind a person being given permission to go out, do you think?"

Maomao put down her scissors, then rolled up the shredded sheet as she thought. "Is it something medical? Maybe they're shorthanded at the clinic in town and they need some help? Or maybe they need to improve the nutritional value of the food they're handing out, or try to get some better drinking water?"

If Chue was coming to Maomao about it, it seemed likely to involve something health related.

"Oh, so close! Miss Chue doesn't quite understand, herself, but the Moon Prince describes it as 'our first case in a while.'"

"Ah. Yeah, okay."

If this was coming from Jinshi—well, it had been a while. He'd had no end of such business for her in the rear palace. Boy, that took her back.

"What exactly does he want? Shall I go to the Moon Prince's chambers?"

"I believe a guide will be arriving shortly to assist with that." Chue looked outside just as Hulan hurried up.

"Lady Maomao," he said. "Please pardon the intrusion."

"Yep, yep," Chue said, standing at the door and answering for Maomao. "What seems to be the matter, my dear Hulan?"

"I come on business from the Moon Prince. I see Miss Chue has

already brought you the message."

"Yes indeed I have, and I'll thank you not to steal my job!"

Maybe she means not to steal her chance to slack off, Maomao thought, automatically translating Chue's words as she heard them.

"I would never. That's not my intention in the least. How much has she explained to you?"

"We didn't get to the real meat of the situation," Chue volunteered.

"I see. The matter is urgent, so perhaps I could explain on the way? The carriage is already waiting."

That wasn't a good sign, not least because once they were on their way, Maomao would be stuck even if it turned out to be something she wished she'd refused.

"I'll thank you not to steal Miss Chue's job, my dear Hulan," Maomao said.

Still... If this assignment was coming straight from Jinshi, she was going to end up doing it anyway. She might as well give in.

"All right, all right," she said. Lihaku must have overheard them, because he was already preparing to leave.

"Grab your medical equipment and come with me," Hulan said.

"Have a nice trip! Be careful!" said the quack. He didn't look about to come with them, so the other two bodyguards stayed at the medical office. That should be enough to keep him safe.

"Sure. Right. Off I go," Maomao said, then she stuffed some tools into a bag and left the office.

The carriage took them to a building northeast of the western capital. On the trip, Maomao was told that there were some sick people there, and it would be appreciated if she could examine them, but when they arrived...

"I know what this is," Maomao said breathlessly.

"You looked so disinterested until a moment ago," Hulan said, mystified.

"The young lady does like her drink," Lihaku said with affectionate exasperation.

"Hee hee hee! What do you think? Not a bad place, huh?" said Chue, puffing out her chest as if she were somehow responsible for this.

The smell of alcohol and grape wine was already filling their nostrils as they approached the building. If this wasn't a dreamland,

then what was?

They were at a winery! Maomao had tasted the western capital's finest wine several times. Maybe the stuff Hulan had brought the other day was from here.

"Miss? You're, uh, drooling," Lihaku said, nudging Maomao with his elbow. She quickly wiped her mouth.

"Miss Maomao, let's get a few bottles as a souvenir before we go home!"

"Sounds good to me, Miss Chue."

"I like the idea, but will anyone be able to stop you two once you get going?" Lihaku groaned. He really was a necessary substitute when Lahan's Brother wasn't around to quip.

"A few bottles, I think we might be able to swing. My aunt runs the place, you see," Hulan said. Happy news!

"Your aunt? Meaning..."

"My father's younger sister," Hulan explained.

"That would be Master Gyokuen's third daughter," Chue added.

"Er... The one that Master Gyoku-ou's oldest son made so much trouble for?" Maomao asked, remembering what she had been told —how Shikyou, the rat, had sold fake wine under this winery's name, eroding its reputation.

"Yes, I'm afraid so. But don't worry. Auntie may be hard on my older brother Shikyou, but she's relatively sweet with me." Hulan smiled awkwardly. "Ah, that's her."

Maomao followed Hulan's gaze and saw a woman who, while beautiful, made her think of a predator. The aura she projected resembled Taomei's, but this woman wore more makeup and her outfit was less reserved. She looked young, maybe in her late twenties, but Maomao would have expected Gyokuen's third daughter to be a bit older than that.

"I know my aunt looks young, but she's in her late thirties, so please mind what you say and do," Hulan advised them.

"All right, thank you," Maomao said, grateful for him clarifying exactly what she was wondering about.

"This is the apothecary you arranged for?" the third daughter asked, giving Maomao an appraising look.

"I am. My name is Maomao, ma'am."

"I heard the master physician couldn't come because of an injury, and that you're here on his behalf. I wonder, are you going to be enough?"

At the moment, they were still giving out that the quack doctor was recovering from his injured leg. In point of fact, he was mostly better, but the excuse seemed likely to keep working for them for a while yet. The quack himself wasn't eager to go out and about, anyway.

"I'm of course no master physician, but I'll do everything in my power. I'm told you have several ill people here. Might I go ahead and examine them?" Maomao asked.

"Yes, all right. Come this way." Without another word, the third daughter started off, and Maomao followed her, equally silent.

The third daughter brought Maomao to a break area of sorts. There were several beds—the place seemed to double as a nap room. Five people lay there, all of them sallow and thin. Each clutched a bucket into which they occasionally vomited.

"Everything seemed fine this morning, but by noon, they were like this. I had them isolated out of concern that it might be something catching."

"A wise decision, ma'am." Maomao put on a smock and covered her mouth with a handkerchief.

"What do you want me to do?" Chue drawled.

"Could you bring me drinking water, salt, and sugar? I'm going to have a look at these people, and I think they're going to need hydration. If you can't get all that, a thin soup would be fine."

"Gotcha!" Chue said and trotted off.

"I'll help Miss Chue," Hulan said, following her.

"And I'll keep watch at the door here," said Lihaku.

"Thank you, Master Lihaku. I'll call you if I need anything."

If whatever this was turned out to be communicable, it wouldn't do for all of them to pile into the room together. Lihaku seemed to understand that.

"Sorry, but I'll wait out here too," the third daughter said, observing from a safe distance.

It might look cold, but that's the smart move, Maomao thought. The woman was apparently Gyoku-ou's younger sister, but she acted nothing like him. If there was one thing the You family wasn't short on, it was distinct personalities.

Maomao went into the room, starting her examinations with the patient who seemed to be in the worst shape. Of the five, the one who appeared to be suffering most was an elderly, white-haired

individual.

Symptoms: vomiting, and the whole body seems hot. Head appears to hurt...

She inspected the person's eyes and tongue, and took their pulse. They were listless and not very coherent, so Maomao tried talking to one of the patients who was comparatively better off.

"Could you describe your symptoms to me?"

"Yes... I feel terrible. My head is pounding, I get so dizzy any time I try to stand up, and the nausea just won't go away."

"Nausea? Any stomachache or diarrhea?"

"N...No. No, none. I just feel queasy."

That could mean...

Maomao looked around the room. Everyone was showing roughly the same symptoms: some of them occasionally threw up in their buckets, but nobody went racing for the bathroom.

"One more question," Maomao said. Then she asked the other patients the same thing. Based on their testimony, she was able to deduce the cause of the problem.

Well, well...

Maomao let out a long sigh and left the room.

"How was it? Did you learn anything?" asked the third daughter, keeping her distance for fear of infection.

"There's no need to worry about the disease spreading," Maomao replied.

"No? What's causing this, then?"

"All five of those people were taste-testers for the wine. The oldest drank more than the rest, it seems."

"Don't tell me... My wine isn't poisoned, is it?!"

Maomao shook her head. "No. It's just a hangover. Or...well, maybe it's a bit early to call it that. Maybe we should just call it a vicious case of drunkenness."

Maomao took off her neckerchief and smock.

"Drunkenness? Not possible! No winery hand would get soused from a little taste test! They'd have to chug down distilled spirits to start feeling it!"

"Do you make distilled spirits?" Maomao asked, her eyes sparkling.

"They do, but they're currently in the process of fermenting. Isn't that right, Auntie?" Hulan broke in. He was carrying a large pot.

“Miiiss Maomao! We brought soup left over from yesterday, and some juice.” Chue, meanwhile, had a ceramic vessel full of fruit juice.

“Thank you.” Maomao opened the lid of Hulan’s pot, picked up the ladle, and stirred the contents.

“Let’s see here...” The balance of salt and water was almost perfect, while the ingredients of the soup included vegetables, mushrooms, and meat. “This is from yesterday? Did all the patients eat it?”

“Yes, I think so. But a number of other people ate it as well, so I don’t think the soup is the problem. I had some too, and I’m fine.”

Nonetheless, Maomao gave the soup a good, hard look. She fished up some of the ingredients with the ladle, picked them up in a pair of chopsticks, and inspected them. “And no one felt ill yesterday?” she asked.

“I don’t think so.”

“In that case, could you call someone who ate this soup yesterday?”

“All right. Give me a moment.” The third daughter summoned a servant, who soon brought several people to Maomao.

“I’d like to ask you some questions. First, could you tell me in detail what you’ve had to eat and drink for the last several days?”

The winery staff who had been brought to her were puzzled by the request, but they told her. One of their number was looking a little pale, so Maomao questioned him closely.

The third daughter looked less than pleased to discover that one of her employees had been concealing an illness. “Why didn’t you say anything?” she demanded.

The man only said, “I’m sorry...” It seemed he had been thinking that if he took off from work, he would be paid less.

“Please do *not* hide things like this from me! You know that hiding a problem only makes it worse!”

While the third daughter was busy upbraiding her employee, Maomao went over the list of food again.

“I knew it,” she said.

“Knew what?” The third daughter looked at her, perplexed.

“This isn’t an illness and it isn’t poison. Everyone really is just hungover.”

“What makes you so sure?”

“Was this soup prepared on-site here?”

“It certainly was!” Chue chirped.

“And everyone suffering from this condition had the soup, yes?”

“Yes, as I believe I told you. Wine production requires constant attention, so people take turns sleeping here. That soup was last night’s dinner. But it obviously didn’t lay *everyone* low. I ate it myself!”

Maomao fished up the ingredients again. “You see this dried mushroom? These were presumably put in here to make the stock.”

“Mushrooms? We don’t see many of those around here.” Now the third daughter was genuinely puzzled. In I-sei Province, it was typical to use meat or bones to make stock, or maybe fish in the coastal areas.

“I don’t know everything about every kind of mushroom, of course. But I strongly suspect this is the cause of the vomiting,” said Maomao.

“But why? I ate that soup myself, and I feel fine.”

“I think this mushroom includes a component that, in effect, makes people unable to hold their alcohol.” Maomao had heard of cases like this more than once before.

“A mushroom can do that? Really?” Hulan asked, surprised.

“Yes, it can. It interferes with the body’s ability to metabolize alcohol.”

Mushrooms, indeed, held many surprises. There were so many kinds, and a great many of them were toxic when eaten raw. Moreover, in many cases the toxic effect was delayed, with onset anywhere from several hours to several days after consumption, so people sometimes ate mushrooms without realizing they were taking in slow-acting poisons.

“Anyone who has alcohol within several days of eating this mushroom, even the strongest of drinkers, is going to get very, very drunk, or so I’m told.” She had to hedge her language because this was, after all, just something she had heard. She didn’t want to be so irresponsible as to say something with certainty that she wasn’t actually certain of. “Admittedly, I’ve never consumed this mushroom myself. I only speak on hearsay, and don’t personally know if it really does what they claim. As such, I’d like to be sure.”

With that, she dunked the ladle into the soup, pulled up some mushrooms, and slipped them right into her mouth.

“Do you have any wine?” she asked.

“Wine?”

“Yes. Preferably something dry, please.”

She thought she felt the third daughter giving her a particularly hard stare, but she decided to ignore it. The other woman called to a servant to bring a drink, and the man soon appeared with a jar of wine.

“All right, here I go. Aaand *gulp*.” Maomao stuck out her tongue. “It’s a very round flavor. There’s just a hint of fruity sweetness left over, but only enough to give it a pleasant accent...”

She ate another mushroom to go along with her drink. Then she had another cup of wine. And another.

“Er... Now she’s just drinking, right?” Hulan asked Lihaku.

“She does like her wine. But she likes poison just as much. That girl drinks like a fish. I don’t think even I could outdrink her.”

He hadn’t really answered Hulan’s question.

I can hear you, you know.

Let him talk. The wine was so good, she couldn’t stop drinking it. She felt her body getting warmer, her mood getting brighter.

Oops, careful.

She observed her hands and saw that they were bright red. The warmth spreading throughout her body started to become uncomfortably hot, and then she pitched unsteadily. That pleasant floaty feeling intensified until her head was spinning.

“Whoa! Hey, miss!” Lihaku held her up. He sounded so far away.

“Hullo, Ms. Maomao! Pardon me!” Maomao registered Chue flexing her fingers—and then jamming them into Maomao’s mouth.

“Bluuurgghhh!”

There was a collective gasp of dismay.

Chue offered Maomao some fruit juice to leaven the sour taste in her mouth. She slowly started to feel like her body was coming back to earth. Dizzily, she lifted her head. “I’m usually quite a strong drinker, but... Well, you see.”

The third daughter and Hulan looked aghast at Maomao, who was covered in vomit.

“Your employees should recover from their hangovers soon enough.” Maomao wiped the sick from her lips, still feeling unsteady.

“Y-Yes, all right. But may I ask you one thing?” The third daughter had begun to take a more polite tone with Maomao. It didn’t seem to be an expression of respect so much as a way of

verbally keeping her distance.

"Yes?"

"Was there some reason you had to eat the soup yourself just to prove your point?"

"Yes, of course," Maomao said.

"What could it possibly be?"

"Oh, you know."

It was the perfect excuse to drink some wine, obviously!

Even Maomao knew she couldn't say that out loud. She settled for a pleasant smile.

Chapter 7: The Inheritance

Maomao was nursing a throbbing headache.

This... This is it!

She was experiencing that fabled thing called a hangover. She wasn't sure it counted as a hangover if it hadn't been an entire day, but having a headache after you stopped being drunk was one of the primary symptoms, wasn't it?

Rattling along in the carriage only made her feel even worse. It wasn't pleasant, and yet...

"Ahh! This is something new!"

Maomao was downright moved to experience something she never had before. It felt a bit like being bitten by a highly venomous snake. And there was a poisonous herb she'd eaten once that had given her nausea like this—which one was it, again? She was enjoying searching her memory for it.

"You don't look like you're quite better, Miss Maomao. Do you tend to be a happy drunk?" Chue asked.

"There's just a little bit left in me that didn't come up. A happy drunk? Ha ha ha! Oh, if there's any of those mushrooms left, give them to me. I'd like to enjoy this a little longer."

"Even Miss Chue is going to get tired of this," she said. "Anyway, I'll go see about those mushrooms."

Maomao didn't know for certain how powerful the "drunken shrooms" really were, but she had heard that even a full day after you ate them, alcohol could still have an outsize effect on you. It wasn't like you could never drink again, but it was best to steer clear for a while.

A real shame, actually, since they'd gotten some wine as a souvenir.

"Hmm, Miss Chue would feel bad having to make you vomit again. I wonder if there's anything left to come up but stomach juices."

"It's all right. I'm feeling much better. Please stop flexing your fingers and trying to stick them in my mouth. Say, you don't have

anything to write with, do you?”

Chue offered her parchment and a writing instrument. She didn’t have a brush, though, just a pen, so it was hard to use. The ink went everywhere as Maomao tried to write with the ungainly instrument. In the bouncing carriage, her handwriting looked almost as unsteady as her stomach.

“What’s that?” Chue asked, peeking over her shoulder.

“Here. I made a note of the mushroom I think was in that soup, along with the quantity of alcohol. This is what kind of effect I’ve observed at various time intervals from ingesting it. I’m thinking I’ll continue to make new entries every thirty minutes. So please give me the rest of the mushrooms.”

You had to be sure to repeat the important things.

“You seem to be having a lot of fun for someone who looks so pale, Miss Maomao.”

“Yeah, you almost make me think of Sir Lahan,” Lihaku said. What a strange person to think of. A dark expression overtook Maomao’s pallid face, and she felt herself get a little less drunk.

“Please don’t mention such untoward names. Wait... Do you know him, Master Lihaku?”

Maomao considered the matter. Even if Lihaku and Lahan knew each other, she had a way of not remembering things that didn’t personally interest her.

“Well, I am—I mean, not directly, but you know—I do technically serve under that old fart. I have to go to his office sometimes, and we’ve bumped into each other now and again. Besides, he’s very...distinctive. You don’t forget him.”

“Huh.” Maomao, profoundly not interested, began to clean up her writing utensils.

“Also, before we left for the western capital, he said, ‘Take care of my little sister for me,’ and gave me some snacks.”

“He’s a complete stranger.”

“Oh. Right. I almost forgot.”

Lihaku might not be much for quips, but he was easy to work with.

“So, getting back to the mushrooms, the question is why a winery would even have mushrooms that make you super drunk, right?”

“Yes, but the mushrooms weren’t the only ingredients. There were a lot of things in that soup.” Maomao cocked her head. “Do mushrooms even grow in the western capital?” They tended to prefer warm, moist environments. The dry air of the western region didn’t seem very congenial to them.

“I think you *could* grow them, but probably not a lot of them,” Chue said.

Maomao agreed. She pictured the mushrooms that had been in the soup. The drunkenness-inducing mushrooms Maomao was familiar with were often found in pine forests—she doubted they could be found among the grassy plains of I-sei Province.

“I wonder if that means they came with the shipment from the central region,” said Chue.

“Hmm... I guess that’s what it would work out to?” Maomao made a thoughtful sound. It was too neat to be coincidence. It

seemed distinctly like someone had deliberately included those mushrooms in order to cause an epidemic of drunkenness at the winery. But what would the motive be?

No point thinking about things I can't possibly know.

She should pick something else to wrap up first. This ability to change gears without a second thought was one of Maomao's virtues.

By the time the carriage arrived back at the main house, Maomao was feeling substantially more sober.

Guess I'd better report to Jinshi.

She planned to tell him exactly what had happened, just like she always did. She assumed he would ask for her opinion on who the culprit was, but that was something she simply didn't know.

Maomao and the others headed to Jinshi's office as usual, but when they got there, they found only Suiren.

"Isn't Master Jinshi here?" Maomao asked. It was just her, Suiren, Chue, and Lihaku in the room, and she used the name "Jinshi" without really thinking about it.

"I would expect to see him back any time now. He was called away to deal with the matter of Master Gyoku-ou's inheritance."

"But that doesn't involve Master Jinshi at all, does it?"

"They wanted a third party to be present. When he heard they were planning to summon Master Lakan, he realized he had better volunteer." Suiren sighed.

"Why would they choose *him*, of all people? Master Rikuson would be better suited to the task." Maomao was openly exasperated.

"I'm afraid I can't say for certain, but it seems they didn't want someone with a long history in the western capital to get in the middle of it." Just then, they heard footsteps from the hall. "Oh, I think he's back."

Jinshi entered the room and took them in at a glance. "Maomao, you're here?" he asked. Gaoshun and Basen, father and son, came in behind him.

"I came to report to you about the winery, sir," Maomao said with a bow.

"Good. We can get right into it." Jinshi loosened his collar and sat on the couch. Suiren set about making tea.

Maomao, meanwhile, told Jinshi what had happened on her

excursion.

"In other words, someone deliberately put the poisonous mushrooms in the soup?" Jinshi asked.

"I think it's very likely. It's worth remembering that the mushroom isn't poisonous if you don't drink alcohol with it. And there haven't really been any places to get a decent drink in the western capital for the last several months, so to me, the fact that the mushrooms turned up at the winery looks premeditated."

"Premeditated? Do you think it was a deliberate attempt at homicide?"

"Unfortunately, sir, it's not that kind of poison. It can make you awfully drunk, but it won't kill you."

Jinshi sipped his tea. Maomao had been offered some as well, but somehow this didn't seem like the time to sit down, and she had remained standing. Chue and Lihaku were standing as well, so as long as Jinshi didn't command her to be seated, she wouldn't. Honestly, though, she wished she could—she was still feeling a touch woozy.

"What was it, then? Someone's idea of a prank?" Jinshi asked.

"If so, it's the kind of prank a wild fox spirit would pull. We wouldn't want one of those running around."

"You're right. I'll start by seeing who distributed the relief provisions."

"Thank you, sir."

Jinshi also happened to give her a *sit down* gesture, so at last Maomao was able to do so. She was done giving her report, but now he appeared to want something else. Normally that would be for her to examine his scar, but today he seemed to have something different in mind.

Maomao glanced around again and found that Lihaku had stationed himself in the adjoining room, perhaps assuming that they would be talking for a while. Chue wasn't there either; maybe Suiren had foisted some minor chore on her.

"I was summoned to deal with a matter involving Master Gyoku-ou," Jinshi said.

"It seems to have dragged on, sir."

"Indeed. Master Gyoku-ou's children were raised in distinctly different ways, as you can tell from observing his grandchildren."

It was obvious, for example, from the relationship between the little shit Gyokujun and Xiaohong.

“Do the second and third sons want you to increase their share of the inheritance?” Maomao asked.

“Interestingly, no. They wanted me to convince the oldest son to accept *his* share, which he’s been refusing.”

Now Maomao really tilted her head. The movement felt a little abrupt—maybe there was still some alcohol in her system. “Sir? I’m afraid I don’t follow. The eldest son is saying he *doesn’t* want the inheritance?”

She thought of Shikyou hauling the decapitated head of a deer around in a bag. Incidentally, she’d had the deer’s brains stewed and then brined in vinegar. It tasted decent enough.

“He says he’s giving it all up.”

“Even granted that Master Gyokuen is still alive, I have to think Master Gyoku-ou’s inheritance comes to a substantial amount.”

“That’s exactly why he says he doesn’t want it. I’d heard he was something of a clod, but this...”

Clod—there was a word you didn’t hear every day. Maomao thought it was sort of like being a blockhead.

“He should just take whatever is coming to him,” she said.

“There are some things a person may not wish to receive.” Jinshi sounded oddly...sympathetic to the man’s situation.

Ah...

Maomao recalled that she was currently talking to someone else with his own *unique* way of thinking. He wanted to extricate himself from certain entanglements of his own.

“So the eldest son doesn’t want the inheritance. The eldest daughter does, but isn’t able to do the job that comes along with it. The second son wants the oldest to receive the inheritance, as Sir Gyoku-ou stipulated while he was alive; the third son thinks everything would be easiest if the second son would inherit.”

That pretty much covered the complete spectrum of possible opinions. No wonder they hadn’t been able to come to an agreement.

“The job that comes along with the inheritance—does that mean the inheritor would have to take over the western capital?”

“Yes, that’s it. It doesn’t help that the family doesn’t think well of the eldest son. Dahai tried to intercede, but the discussions went nowhere.”

Dahai—Maomao seemed to remember that was Gyokuen’s third son.

“It sounds very complicated, sir.” She was trying to make Jinshi feel better, but personally she didn’t want any part of this. She would listen politely about the inheritance, offer a few noncommittal comments, and gracefully make her exit when the moment was right.

“Hold on... You’re just making noncommittal comments to get out of talking about this, aren’t you?”

“Perish the thought, sir.”

Jinshi was getting better at reading the subtleties of Maomao’s expression.

“Your pallor is uncommonly good today too.”

“Oh, you think so?”

She’d vomited up most of the alcohol, but she still had a pleasant buzz, and that didn’t escape him.

Maomao knew she would be in for another lecture if Jinshi found out she’d been “experimenting” again, so she decided to change the subject. “Sir, I heard Master Gyoku-ou’s wife was his personal aide. Shouldn’t she be a part of these discussions?”

Women might not have many rights, but surely a man’s wife should have some say?

“Sir Gyoku-ou’s wife dislikes any kind of attention. She just sat there the entire time, offering no input whatsoever.”

I might have guessed.

That would match what Maomao had heard from Chue. Linese men loved quiet, demure women, but in this situation it meant there was no one to take this matter in hand.

“It seems there’s a specific reason why she prefers to shun the spotlight,” Jinshi said.

“Yes, Miss Chue mentioned it to me.” This would be the story of her being in a foreign country for several years.

“I see. For her, even being seen by her own family is too much, and I was told that she had determined to say nothing at all about the matter of the inheritance.”

“Not even to her own family?”

She hadn’t looked quite that misanthropic, Maomao thought.

“So you’ve heard that this woman was originally the daughter of a prosperous merchant family in the central region, and that she began helping with business once she came to the western capital to get married.”

“Er... More or less.” This was the first Maomao was hearing of

the woman's birthplace, but it would explain why she had the facial features of someone from the central region.

"She was in a shipwreck, her fate unknown, until several years later she miraculously returned to the western capital. The situation was beyond her control, of course, but that didn't stop some people from spreading unsavory rumors about the woman who had left her home for years on end."

"Ahh. Yes, I understand."

A woman, alone in a foreign land? A beautiful woman, at that? Of course there would be uncouth speculation as to how she had survived.

The wife's life so far could easily fill a book.

"I'm sure she underwent a great deal. It was after those experiences that she began to avoid being seen in public. I think it's even possible that Sir Gyoku-ou's hatred of foreigners has something to do with what happened to his wife."

Maomao nodded earnestly, but privately she hoped she could grab a break soon. Her stomach had been emptied of all its other contents along with the alcohol, and she wanted to put some food in it.

"All right, well, I think it's about time for me to go," she said. She stood up and made to leave the room, but promptly tripped.

"Hey." Jinshi was keeping her on her feet with a firm grip on her wrist. "What's gotten into you? You don't seem very steady."

"Oh, gee, do I?" Maomao was starting to sound a little tipsy.

"I thought I might ask you to examine my scar while you were here, but I think something's up." He looked at her, suspicious.

"Oh, sir. It's your imagination! And that scar doesn't need me to examine it anymore."

"I need you to see your responsibility through to the end. What if the wound begins to fester?"

"It won't do that! I don't even examine the scar on that little girl's belly anymore, and she's much younger and smaller than you, Master Jinshi!"

"Well, she's her and I'm me."

Without quite meaning to, Maomao gave Jinshi a bit of a scowl. His face actually lit up, as if to say *Yeah, that's the stuff!*

"If you'll excuse me, sir," Maomao said—but her attempt to make a decisive exit was stymied by a particularly embarrassing noise from her stomach. It had, we reiterate, lost all its former

possessions along with the alcohol and was now completely empty.

As if specifically designed to torment Maomao and her yearning stomach, a wonderful smell drifted into the room.

"Curious about dinner?" Jinshi asked with a grin when he saw her face.

"I can't say I'm *not* curious."

"No? Oh, Suiren, what's being served today?" Jinshi called into the next room.

Jinshi's social station was such that normally, he would have been served practically more than one person could eat. The fact that he could even ask what was being served implied that these days, even the Emperor's younger brother was given only enough dinner to actually finish.

He's being frugal.

Suiren appeared with a tray, smiling. "Tonight we have steamed chicken with cold vegetables and Dongpo pork," she said.

Okay, not exactly frugal.

Maomao swallowed hard to keep herself from drooling.

"Would you like some?" Jinshi asked.

It only took her a second to reply, "If you're offering, sir!" She felt very sorry for the quack back at the medical office, but meat would always get the better of her. She was a little worried that Taomei or someone might look askance at her dining with Jinshi—their social statuses were just too far apart—but so it went. Suiren tucked the pork between some slices of bread and brought it over. What was Maomao supposed to do?

At the very least she asked, "Are you sure it's all right for me to eat the same food as the Moon Prince?"

"Oh, I don't see why not. If you're worried, we could always say you were checking it for poison."

So she had Suiren's permission. There was even a chair set out so Maomao could eat.

"All right!" Maomao clenched her fist—but she couldn't help noticing that something about the meal was different from usual. "Excuse me?" she asked Suiren carefully.

"Yes? Is everything all right?"

"Isn't the Moon Prince usually served some wine before his meals?"

It was a roundabout way of asking where the hell her drink was.

“Oh, Miss Maomao, you mustn’t! Remind me who it was who was vomiting her guts out just a few minutes ago?” Chue said. How very unnecessary of her.

“Wait, what are you talking about?” Jinshi asked.

“Oh, just Miss Maomao’s bad habit.”

Then Chue described to Jinshi, in detail, precisely what Maomao had worked so hard not to be too specific about.

“And that’s the story!” she concluded.

“Hmm, indeed,” said Jinshi, who had listened attentively the entire time. Then he gave Maomao an overpowering glare.

Curse you, Miss Chue!

Needless to say, no wine was forthcoming.

Chapter 8: Junjie

After more than six months in the western capital, there was a fairly stable group of servants attached to Maomao and the others.

"Lady Maomao, I've brought the materials you requested." A boy, not yet old enough for his coming-of-age ceremony, appeared at the medical office. He was too old to think of him as a child but too young to think of him as a man. Maomao had heard he was thirteen, but he was still a good fist shorter than her. Regardless of his size, though, he was polite and dedicated. He mostly did menial tasks for Maomao and the other occupants of the medical office. They valued him very much, because he was polite and listened well.

"Thank you," she said. She began to sort the materials he'd brought her, and was going to hand him some dried fruit in lieu of a tip, but he said—

"Thank you, but I can't accept that. I'm receiving a salary."

Gosh, he's so mature! In her admiration for the young man, Maomao couldn't help thinking of the little brat at the Verdigris House back in the capital. Chou-u was almost the same age as this boy, but he could stand to learn a thing or two from the kid's attitude. Unfortunately, changing a personality wasn't that easy.

It's been a while. Maybe I should write to him.

Maomao didn't have much time to think about it, though, because someone shouted from outside the office, "Heeey! Is anyone there?"

"Yes," Maomao answered. She looked outside, wondering who it could be, to find Lahan's Brother. He set down a basket he had been carrying. "Oh, hello there. Welcome home." Maomao went over to him.

Lahan's Brother was very busy. He was going here, there, and everywhere to the areas around the western capital, setting up farm fields, and coming back again. He might deny it, but Lahan's Brother was doing more and taking more initiative than anyone to plow the earth.

Maomao looked into the basket to find some sad-looking sweet potatoes.

"These are hardly potatoes. They're just roots." Lahan's Brother looked crestfallen.

"Don't worry, we can eat them...if we have to," Maomao said. They could steam them and consume them with the skin still on. They were so puny that they would cook nice and quick.

"At least we were able to harvest a halfway decent amount of these." Lahan's Brother tossed a white potato to her.

"Maybe white potatoes do better in this climate."

"Probably. The harvest would've been better without those grasshoppers, but, well, here we are."

It was best not to count your eggs before they hatched. Lahan's Brother had a deep furrow in his brow; maybe he was contemplating the harsh reality of the situation.

"You don't look very happy," Maomao observed. Lahan's Brother was holding up one of the potatoes and studying it with a grim expression.

"Look at it. It's tiny. I don't think we did enough sprout removal or fertilizing when it was growing."

Maomao hadn't heard of sprout removal before, but she guessed it was something like culling.

"It's no use harvesting a bunch of potatoes when they're this size," Lahan's Brother groaned.

"Ahh. Is that what you're worried about?" Maomao saw what Lahan's Brother was trying to say.

"But why is it such a problem if the potatoes are small?" asked the servant boy. "If there's enough of them, it shouldn't matter how large they are, right?" So he wasn't just dedicated, but curious, as well.

Lahan's Brother showed the boy the potato he was holding. "You see how this potato looks a little green?"

"Now that you mention it, yes, it is a bit greenish."

"That green part is poisonous."

"Poisonous?!" The boy blinked. "B-But you're supposed to be able to eat potatoes, right? That's what we grow them for."

"Yes, it's edible. Just peel the skin off, and there's no problem at all. But these sprouts are poisonous, too, so you have to make sure to cut them off when you're cooking it. A potato this small isn't very ripe, and there are a lot of green spots on the skin."

“If you accidentally eat the green stuff, you’ll find it’s very bitter and gives you a tingling sensation,” Maomao volunteered. Without a word, Lahan’s Brother dropped a knifehand on her forehead. The message seemed to be: *What are you eating?* She’d always been told to be especially careful of food poisoning when dealing with potato dishes.

“As long as it’s prepared correctly, you’ll be fine. Not even a stomachache. So don’t worry. But if you experience any funny sensations while you’re eating a potato, stop right away, hear?”

“Yes, sir.”

While Lahan’s Brother was busy instructing the young servant on potato safety, Maomao took a closer look at the sweet potatoes.

“Not to get ahead of ourselves, but could I steam the sweet potatoes now?” she asked. The quack doctor would be wanting a snack soon.

“Hmm... Let’s wait on those. They’re not at their best right after being harvested. They’ll be sweeter if we let them sit for a couple of weeks.”

“Even...root-y ones like these?”

“You want them to taste as good as they can, don’t you? Even if it’s not by much.”

Maomao had to agree with him.

“U-Um,” the kid said, hesitantly stepping forward.

“Yeah? What?”

“Well, sir and ma’am... I know it’s a little late, but perhaps I could introduce myself?” He was a humble enough young man to want to greet them properly.

“Introduce yourself? Yes, good idea. That’s a good attitude!” Lahan’s Brother’s eyes were shining, as if he had spied a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. Might he, at last, have here a chance to offer his name?

“Thank you, sir. I’m called Junjie. I’m told it’s a very commonplace name, so I hope it may be easy for you to remember.”

Maomao had heard it before, but she always forgot—today she decided she would try to remember.

“J...Junjie, you say?” Lahan’s Brother was frowning. For some reason, the young man’s name seemed to bother him.

“And what was your family name, again?” Maomao asked the young man—ahem, *Junjie*—as if to say *Of course I remembered your name.*

“Ma’am. It’s Kan. Another quite common name—indeed, I believe I share it with the honored strategist currently residing here.” The young man—ahem, Junjie—seemed somewhat reluctant.

Lahan’s Brother, meanwhile, was shaking like a man struck by lightning.

“Kan? Yeah, that is the same name as our strategist, and it *is* pretty common. Not that I’m one to talk!” Lihaku had wandered in at some point and now joined the conversation. He must have been helping Lahan’s Brother, because he was holding a basket of white potatoes.

“Yes, a very typical name indeed. I think I know three different Kans myself,” said the quack doctor, who spotted the basket and seemed to be contemplating whether it could be put to the service of some kind of snack.

“Yes, sirs,” the young man—Junjie!—said. “My only concern is that there might be some honored personage here who shares my name. At the last place I worked, I had the same name as someone else, and he decided he didn’t like it. I must say, I’m a little worried.”

Lahan’s Brother spasmed again. He was as pale as if he’d seen a ghost.

“Huh! Some guys have a real stick up their ass about that kind of thing, don’t they? So what did you do about it?” Lihaku asked, setting down the basket of potatoes.

“As I’m the eldest son, I asked people to call me Haku’un.” That was to say *haku*, meaning “eldest son,” and *un*, meaning “cloud.”

“That seems innocuous as nicknames go.”

“It is, it is! Junjie is just such a common name, and once I found out it would be a problem...”

Lahan’s Brother had a look on his face so deathly grim that it was hard to put into words. He was pale and sweating profusely; Maomao wondered if he was feeling sick.

“Oh, but if anyone else here already has my name, please, by all means, forget it’s mine. I don’t mind if you simply call me whatever you please.” Junjie gave them a smile, but it was clear he’d been through a lot.

Lahan’s Brother stood there with his face squinched up, looking like he wanted to say something. For some time now he had been silent, only reacting physically.

“I’m overjoyed simply to be allowed to work here. Everyone is

so kind, and there aren't many places where you can receive a steady salary at this difficult moment. If all I have to do to stay here is change my name, that's no problem at all. By all means, call me anything."

Junjie pounded his chest. As the oldest son—not that old, but still—he would do whatever it took to support his family.

"My goodness, but life has been harsh to you, hasn't it? Well, don't you worry. There are no nasty people here who will tell you to change your name. Come now, how about a snack?"

The quack offered him a mugwort mochi, filled out with plenty of mugwort.

"Oh, no, sir, I couldn't..."

"Please, I insist! You have to eat if you're going to grow big and strong!"

Junjie tried to politely decline, but the quack turned out to be a hard man to refuse. It was Junjie who caved first.

"Thank you very much, sir. A-Ahem, I'm not very hungry at the moment, so perhaps I could take this home to my younger brothers?"

"Oh! Siblings! Well, you should take plenty, then!"

Quack doctor! Our food supply isn't unlimited, you know! Maomao thought. Nonetheless, no one else seemed inclined to stop him, so she didn't make a big deal out of it.

Having gone through an extensive medley of different expressions, Lahan's Brother was now simply looking at the ground.

"What's the matter, Lahan's Brother? Have you caught a cold?" Maomao asked. He was indisputably one of those who had worked the hardest since they'd arrived in the western capital. It wouldn't do anyone any good if he collapsed.

"Oh, sir! Please, pardon me. How rude of me to introduce myself without asking your name," Junjie said. "What *is* your name, sir?"

There they were—the words Lahan's Brother had waited six months to hear.

Everyone turned toward him expectantly. At last!

After a long moment, he spoke. And he said...

"Lahan's Brother."

"Er... Is everything all right?"

Wasn't his catchphrase supposed to be "Don't call me Lahan's Brother!"?

“My name is…Lahan’s Brother!” Lahan’s Brother said, and then he spun on his heel and stalked off.

“So he’s…Master Lahan’s Brother?” Junjie was as confused as any of them, but they’d had it straight from the horse’s mouth.

As he walked away, Lahan’s Brother had never looked more melancholy.

Chapter 9: The Foreign Girl

Ultimately, the dispute over Gyoku-ou's inheritance remained at an impasse. Maomao, for her part, just kept working like she always did. There was no reason for her to stick her nose into a bunch of strangers' personal argument.

Hulan showed up at the medical office again. This time he said, "There's a patient who wishes to be seen by a woman, if that's all right."

He's like Rear-Palace Jinshi.

Hulan seemed to spend a lot of time running messages for other people, but he didn't appear to mind.

"Is the patient a woman?" Maomao asked.

"Yes, the daughter of a good family. You must forgive us; female physicians, or women who have anything like a doctor's qualifications, are exceedingly rare in the western capital."

Not so different from the time with Xiaohong.

Maomao looked at the young man, so humble despite his relatively high birth. It was true; even when women got involved in medicine, it was rarely as anything more than apothecaries or perhaps midwives. Even in the royal capital, Maomao had never seen an actual female physician.

"What are the symptoms?" she asked.

"A headache that won't go away. She's tried the usual remedies, but nothing helps. Hence talk turned to having her seen by a proper doctor."

"So you want me to make a house call?"

Hulan smiled as if he'd thought she'd never ask. "It would help very much. I'll inform the Moon Prince about it."

"Is this not on his orders?" Maomao was surprised. She had been sure this was coming directly from Jinshi.

"No, this is a personal request from me. An acquaintance asked if I knew any female medical personnel."

"All right. As far as I'm concerned, if the Moon Prince approves, then I'll go. But if he doesn't, then I can't help you."

“I certainly understand.”

Hulan left the medical office. Maomao watched him go.

“What’s going on, miss?” Lihaku asked, watching too.

“Nothing. Tell me, what do you think about Master Gyoku-ou’s third son?”

“Huh... Well, it depends what you mean by that, I guess.”

“Something about him just...nags at me.”

She couldn’t put a name to it; it just bothered her. Something about him felt off.

“That right? Maybe it’s because he’s so much like you, miss. Likes repel and everything.”

“S-So much like him? What about me is *like him*?” Maomao asked. She didn’t actively dislike Hulan. She just found his behavior a little odd.

“Come on. What about the way you casually size people up all the time?”

Lihaku might seem like a big mutt, but he didn’t just wag his tail and go along with everything everyone said. He was no bureaucrat, but he was quick-witted.

“Do I...size people up?”

“You’re looking at me like I’m a shar-pei right now.”

Maomao didn’t say anything. A shar-pei was a large fighting dog. She was all but struck dumb by the perspicacity of Lihaku’s observation.

“The way she does that, it’s just like Lahan,” Lahan’s Brother said. Why was he here? He was having tea with the quack doctor. Fishwort tea, by the smell of it. It was a fast-growing herb with medicinal uses, but it was hard to cultivate in a dry climate, and Lahan’s Brother had given up the attempt.

“Lahan’s Brother, there are certain things you just don’t say to a person,” Maomao huffed. Meanwhile, she started gathering up her medical implements. She suspected Jinshi would acquiesce to Hulan’s request. “Are you implying that I behave at all like Lahan?”

“Absolutely.”

“Every little tic.”

For some reason Lihaku and Lahan’s Brother both answered in the affirmative. Only the quack looked uncertain. “Me, I’m not so sure.” Normally he was no help at all, but at this moment he proved a welcome tonic.

“There it is again. You were evaluating the old doc here,

weren't you?"

"Heavens, no." Maomao tried to play dumb, but Lihaku's remark weighed strangely heavily on her heart.

Was I really judging him?

Although Hulan referred to her as "Lady Maomao," his actual speech was never more than just polite. It wasn't unlike how Maomao used superficially polite language toward Jinshi.

If Hulan's intent, however, was to privately look down on her, he had an awfully uncoordinated way of doing it. Maomao didn't think he was that stupid.

If anything, I think maybe he was testing my humanity because he's found out who I really am.

As much as Maomao desperately didn't want to acknowledge it, she was the offspring of the freak strategist and a courtesan. If Hulan had discovered that fact, it would explain his attitude toward her. Would Maomao, the daughter of one of her nation's most important people, have him punished for his insolence? Or would she maintain her facade of being a commoner and let it go?

Or perhaps the test was of an even more fundamental nature than that: whether she would notice that he was belittling her behind her back, or care.

Maomao shoved the last of her instruments into her bag. She didn't take well to being made to play the fool.

As if on cue, Chue appeared a little while later. "Permission granted by the Moon Prince!" she drawled. She had her things with her, clearly raring to go out. "There's a carriage waiting outside—come on! Let's go!"

"I appreciate this," said Hulan. Apparently he was coming, too, because he was wearing a cloak to keep the dust off.

"Where exactly are we going?" Maomao asked.

"It's a bit of a ride. If I mentioned the post town by the port, would you know what I meant?"

So he wasn't going to tell her exactly—it sounded like he was testing her.

I see what this is.

Maomao remembered something Jinshi had said, about all the foreigners who couldn't go home on account of the insects being gathered in one place. Gyokuen's third son, Dahai, had contrived to bring them all to that post town.

A foreigner who can't go home, and daughter of a good house.

Maomao was getting a very bad feeling about this, but as usual, she tried to act like everything was fine.

Not that it's usually done me any good.

Even so, she affected ignorance, climbing into the carriage as if she hadn't noticed much of anything at all.

They bounced along in the carriage for a good couple of hours. It was much closer, actually, than the farming village they'd gone to. Now, in addition to the smells of dry earth and grass, the wind brought them the damp aroma of the tide.

Chue was there and, as ever, Lihaku had come along as bodyguard. That was all well and good, but the carriage had a third occupant: a mysterious, oversize basket. It was equipped so that Chue could carry it around carefully on her back.

"What's this?" Maomao asked.

"It's my husband," Chue said, but her response sounded strangely studied. And also didn't make much sense.

"Um... Your husband, Miss Chue? Would you be referring to Master Baryou?"

"Yes! I thought he might be of some help on this trip."

Maomao wasn't sure what standard of "help" Chue was going by, but she hoped she knew what she was doing. Even worse, she wasn't convinced the basket was big enough for a full-grown man. If he was in there, he must have been rolled up into a ball. She had a passing desire to peek in, but she didn't want to accidentally overstimulate Baryou and have him pass out, so she quashed her curiosity.

The carriage went south from the western capital, along the same road they had taken when they had first arrived. Carriages must have traveled it frequently, because it was actually paved. Probably to prevent ruts from forming, which would eventually happen on bare earth even here where there wasn't much rain.

"There, you can see it," said Hulan, peeking in at them from the driver's bench.

"It's quite something," Maomao said, and she meant it. She'd expected a speck of a town, but there were easily several thousand buildings there. It was such a brilliant place that she felt sorry to be just passing through.

There was the distinct sense that the place was probably more

vibrant at night, thanks to all the sailors it entertained. This wasn't just a place to shop and eat; it was redolent of a pleasure district as well. It might not look quite like the one Maomao knew, but it was unmistakably familiar, and made her a little homesick. She wondered how her "older sisters" were doing. There was no need to wonder about the old madam, who was certainly alive and kicking.

Unfortunately for Maomao, they were indeed just passing through that area. In ordinary times, the streets might have been lined with stalls selling gifts and souvenirs, but as it was now, only a few places hawking modest provisions and daily necessities dotted the road, like a mouth full of missing teeth. Every once in a while she saw a place selling jewelry or luxury goods that was open, but they were inevitably empty.

She also saw courtesans leaning lazily out of windows; as the carriage went by, their eyes lit up, trying to espy whether there might be potential customers within. She saw dancing girls practicing, balancing bowls of milk tea on their heads and trying not to spill a drop.

The carriage rattled up to the city's most prominent inn, located on its best plot of land, and stopped. The building was made of stone, the roof tiled, the door painted a vivid vermilion, all in a way that evoked the central region.

"Here we are, my dear husband! You can come out now."

Baryou slithered from the basket. Maomao didn't know how he had managed it, but he really was in there. She thought he might be suspicious of what he saw when he emerged, but he was surprisingly sedate.

No, wait...

"Are his eyes closed?" Maomao asked.

"Yes! Eliminating visual input helps reduce stress."

"Oh, come on..."

Maomao's thoughts had unwittingly come out her mouth, but Chue and Baryou seemed used to this arrangement. She expertly guided him along as they walked.

Inside, the inn was laid with a carpet so lush it seemed wrong to step on it with outdoor shoes.

"This way, please," one of the inn staff said. With the care of someone who'd always had to live frugally, Maomao made sure to brush the dust from her shoes before stepping onto the carpet.

All the servants bowed their heads. Many looked distinctly

foreign.

They were shown upstairs, to the biggest room on the third floor. A golden-haired, fortyish man stood before the door. His skin and hair color, along with his deep-carved features, made it easy to guess that he, too, was from another land. Perhaps Shaoh, Maomao thought, although his skin tone made him appear to be from slightly farther north.

"Pardon me." A woman, also foreign-looking, came up and began patting Maomao down, checking for anything dangerous. "What's this?" she asked.

"Herbal medicine, ma'am. It treats stomachaches."

"And this?"

"Salve, ma'am. It treats burns."

"And this?"

"A bandage, ma'am. It's for the treatment of injuries."

This went on for some time. Maomao was just lucky she'd decided not to tuck her needles or scissors into her robes. They were in her bag.

Chue was next up for a body search. Maomao wondered if it might take even longer than it had for herself, but it was over in a flash. Maomao found the triumphant grin Chue gave her strangely galling.

Lihaku wasn't going to have any qualms about someone searching him, but Maomao wasn't so sure about Baryou. To her surprise, though, he didn't flinch. No, wait. He'd fainted standing up.

Are we really sure he should be here? Maomao was growing increasingly anxious, but at last they were allowed into the room.

The huge chamber was full of exotic-looking furniture, not to mention a massive canopied bed. Beside the bed was a middle-aged woman in a foreign-style skirt. She was slim and black haired, and there was a tinge of green in her eyes.

Only Maomao approached her; Chue stayed about five steps back, while Lihaku and Baryou took up station by the wall near the door.

"Thank you for coming. The young mistress, she..." the woman began, and other than a polite bow, launched directly into explaining the patient's condition. She seemed to want Maomao to conduct the examination before any such frivolities as introductions.

“If I may, then.” Maomao pulled back the bed curtain to find a young woman with an angular face and cheeks dappled with freckles. Maomao felt unaccustomed fondness for that. The young woman had platinum hair and blue eyes; she looked to be twelve or thirteen, but then, foreigners often looked much older than the Linese. Perhaps it was safe to assume that she was somewhat younger than she appeared.

So that would make her about ten? Maybe even younger than that?

They had told Maomao that she was suffering with a headache, but she looked notably engaged.

“I’d like to check your condition. May I touch you?” Maomao asked.

“No-you-may-not” was all the girl said.

Maomao gave the middle-aged woman a questioning tilt of her head.

“She means that you are to conduct the examination without physical contact with the young lady,” said the woman, who, unlike her young mistress, spoke fluent Linese.

“If-you-are-a-truly-great-doctor-you-can-do-it,” the girl added.

Okay, wait. This is not what I signed up for.

Why was she even here, then? She felt like the girl was mocking her. Maomao looked at the young patient, wondering how she was to achieve this patently unreasonable demand of doing an entire medical examination without touching her.

“How close would be acceptable, then?” she asked.

The girl cocked her head, apparently not understanding what Maomao had said. Her attendant whispered in her ear.

“The young mistress will permit you to examine her from a distance of sixty centimeters.”

Sixty centimeters?! A lot of examining she could do from there!

“All right,” Maomao said. “How much clothing is the young mistress willing to remove?” She suspected the answer was *not a scrap*, but it was worth asking.

“If she may leave her underwear on, and if the menfolk will leave the room, that would be acceptable.”

Huh?

She was willing to do all that?

On top of everything else, conducting an examination of a patient who didn’t really speak your language presented problems of its own. *Is her head pounding, or throbbing, or aching?* Maomao

could ask, but she was convinced she wouldn't get an answer.

To be fair, even being able to speak a few words of Linese was a respectable achievement—it just wasn't enough to really make herself understood.

"In that case, please allow me to ask about her symptoms."

Chue took up position next to Maomao, brush in hand and ready to write, simply oozing the confidence of a woman who could get things done. She was ready to make some notes.

"When did she first feel this pain?"

"It started about ten days ago. She looked rather unwell before that, but we assumed it was because of the unaccustomed lifestyle she's been living the past few months. I'm embarrassed to admit that we overlooked the possibility of actual illness," the attendant explained.

"What kind of pain is it?"

"A dull ache, she says. However, sometimes it becomes so intense that she drops to her knees."

If it was so bad that it brought her to her knees, that sounded like a serious problem. But something nagged at Maomao.

"Has she been getting enough exercise the last several months?"

"I should say so. I might even say she's been getting a bit too much." The woman looked at the girl and seemed a bit exasperated. The child was lying placidly in bed at the moment, but apparently she could be quite a firecracker.

"How's her appetite?"

"Appetite? Well, as a matter of fact, she started eating less about two months ago, but we also attributed that to the unfamiliar environment. The last few days, though, she's eaten hardly anything at all, and can only take liquid foods."

"So the symptoms include headache and severe loss of appetite?"

"That's correct."

Ahh. This is starting to make sense.

She didn't want to be touched or examined at close distance, but she was willing to take off her clothes. Maomao thought she knew what might explain all those things—but she still didn't have quite enough evidence to say for certain.

"Miss Chue."

"Yes, Miss Maomao? How can I help?"

"Could you get these for me?" Maomao dashed off a list of the

items she needed on the memo paper.

"I'm on my way!" Chue dipped her head and hustled out of the room.

"We're going to prepare some medicine. Please be patient," Maomao said.

"Did... Did you really figure it out just from that?" the attendant asked, looking at Maomao suspiciously. And well she might: the young woman hadn't removed her clothing or even let Maomao touch her. It was easy to think Maomao was blowing smoke.

"If this draught works, it will confirm my diagnosis. Or am I not permitted to administer medicine either?"

"Of course you may."

"Is there any foodstuff that disagrees with the young lady?"

"Nothing in particular, I think. As long as the medicine isn't unbearably bitter, it should be all right."

Well, that at least was reassuring.

Chue came trotting back into the room. "Thank you for waiting!" She held up a glass. It carried a sweet smell of citrus and honey, and the glass was perspiring.

Maomao transferred the drink to another cup and took a sip. "This is simply to demonstrate it's not poisonous," she said.

"May I try it as well?" the attendant asked. Maomao gave it to her. She took a sip and said, "This is medicine? It tastes...good. It's so cool and refreshing."

"Yes, ma'am. If you would be so kind as to ask the young lady to drink it."

"All right."

The attendant took the glass to the young lady, who blinked but took a hesitant sip. She pursed her lips and slowly drank a little bit at a time. Finally she stopped drinking at all, her face all scrunched up.

"What's the matter? Please, drink it down," Maomao said.

The attendant whispered something to the girl, but Maomao couldn't catch what it was. She didn't need to, though; she had the proof she needed.

"So I can't touch or approach her, but you can?" she asked the attendant. "I think the problem is in the young lady's mouth. A back tooth, I suspect. If you would kindly check for me?"

"A—A back tooth?" The attendant tried to look, but the girl shut her mouth fast.

“Perhaps you could poke her in the cheek,” Maomao suggested.

The attendant tried it. Maomao almost found the moment funny; it reminded her of Yao and En’en, back in the capital.

When the attendant pressed on the girl’s left cheek, she flinched visibly.

I thought so.

“The source of her headache is a rotten tooth,” Maomao announced.

A minor indisposition as of several months prior, worsening rapidly over the past ten days. Most likely, a slightly infected tooth had been left until the hole had gotten too big. At first it would simply sting, causing the girl to eat a little less eagerly. She would start to chew on the right side of her mouth, to avoid the bad tooth. That would put strain on her shoulder and neck, causing the headaches.

The girl had wanted to hide the bad tooth, but she couldn’t conceal how poorly she was feeling. So she covered by reporting only the headache; meanwhile, her impossible stipulations were presumably intended to avoid having to treat the rotten tooth.

The attendant was looking at the young lady as if she had a few choice words she wished she could share with her—maybe in their native tongue. But since Maomao and the others were present, she refrained.

They did need to do something about that tooth, however, and as such, the attendant abandoned her dignity in favor of expedience. She began a distinctly unladylike wrestling match with the girl, who proved every bit the firebrand she had sounded like.

“May I be permitted to touch the young lady and examine the inside of her mouth?” Maomao asked.

“Y-Yes, please go right ahead,” the attendant said, keeping the “young lady” firmly in hand despite the grip the girl had on her hair. The attendant seemed completely different than she had at first.

The young woman, overpowered, was left with no choice but to open her mouth.

“Yikes! It’s completely black. This must be extremely painful,” Maomao said. This would be way beyond a bit of tingling when she drank cold water. Packing the tooth with medicinal herbs was one way of treating such a problem, but for a tooth this far gone it seemed unlikely to help.

“Can you treat it?” the attendant asked.

“Pulling it would be quicker,” Maomao informed her. “It’s a milk tooth; it shouldn’t cause any problems to do that.” She didn’t know how much the girl could understand, but she froze with her mouth still open.

“All right. If you’d be so kind.”

The girl didn’t seem to know much more than the smattering of Linese she’d spoken at first, so she didn’t quite follow the conversation. She understood, however, that she was in imminent danger, and she began to thrash so hard that the guard outside had to be called in to help hold her down.

She could stand to be a little *bit ladylike!* It was getting so bad that Maomao was contemplating calling Lihaku to help too.

Once Maomao was sure they had the girl’s mouth held open so she wouldn’t get any digits bitten off, she plunged her fingers in.

“Ah, it’s loose. This will come right out.”

“What would you like to do for an anesthetic?” Chue asked. “Miss Maomao?”

“An anesthetic would hardly make a difference. It won’t take long. She’ll just have to be so kind as to put up with it.” The girl was healthy enough to require two full-grown adults to hold her down; she would be fine.

Even Maomao hadn’t packed forceps for tooth-pulling, so she asked for some to be brought.

“All right. This isn’t going to be pleasant, but it’ll be over in a second.”

All attitude of deference toward the young mistress had evaporated. The attendant, in particular, looked furious that the girl had kept the tooth pain a secret from her, and was hell-bent on getting the problem fixed.

The girl was pinioned, her mouth held open; she couldn’t have screamed if she’d wanted to.

I really am sorry about this, Maomao mentally told the girl—and then she grabbed the rotten tooth with the forceps and *pulled*. The girl pulled back almost as hard, but she was surprised to discover that the tooth popped right out.

“There we go. I’m going to put some medicine on there.” Maomao daubed on something to stop the bleeding, then gave the girl a wadded bandage to bite down on. “When the bleeding stops, throw the bandage away,” she said. “If it doesn’t stop, have her bite

on another bandage and wait until it does. The young mistress should avoid any vigorous activity. I would also advise taking it easy on the wine—but I gather she's a little young for that anyway."

She also gave them some painkillers, although she didn't think they would be necessary.

The attendant and the guard both looked bedraggled, while the young woman was staring at the gaping hole in her milk tooth.

Judging by how many of her adult teeth she has, I'd say she's about ten years old.

Maomao gave them the medicine and a written sheet of instructions, then got ready to go home.

"Amazing! I knew I was right to ask you," said Hulan. Maomao could practically see him rubbing his hands obsequiously. "When they first told me to find a female physician, I didn't know what I would do!"

"Yes, it must be difficult in the western capital," Maomao replied. In light of what she had learned, she suspected it was the young woman who had requested the female doctor—something she had assumed they wouldn't be able to find anywhere around here. One more strategy for concealing her bad tooth.

These brats. No end of trouble.

With the job successfully concluded, Maomao was back in the medical office.

"Great! That's it for us," Chue said, trotting away with her Baryou basket on her back.

"You know, what was he even there for?" Lihaku pondered.

"Search me," replied Maomao, who still worried that the basket looked pretty cramped. Well, nothing to do but get back to work.

○●○

"Age—twelve, thirteen. Possibly a bit younger. Platinum hair, blue eyes."

"What do you think? Ring any bells?" Chue asked her husband in his basket.

"One. Just one. But..."

"But what?"

"That person is a boy."

"Hoh, hoh!" Chue pictured the girl with the rotten tooth. Yes, at

that age, a child's gender could still be concealed. "If it were a boy, who would it be?"

"There's a nation that's part of Hokuaren, the kingdom of the Ri people. I believe the fourth son of their royal family matches that age and description. I recognized a few of the words the 'young mistress' used while they were holding her down—they were oaths in the Ri language."

There was a tendency in Li to lump together every country in Hokuaren, to the north, and view it as a single entity, but in fact it was the name for a collection of different nations.

There was also a tendency for people to think of Chue's husband as nothing but feeble, but he was by no means incompetent.

Baryou's job was to look at every scrap of paper that came to the Moon Prince, and to understand even those things that escaped the Prince himself.

"Now, why would someone so important stay put in the western capital instead of going home to his country? Ooh, it's like a little mystery!"

"I only pray that it's not really him. My stomach hurts." After that there were no more sounds from the basket, as if to say *Please, speak no more.* So Chue returned silently to their room. She would have to make something nice and easy on the stomach for dinner.

Chapter 10: Emergency Patient, Emergency Situation

Autumn wore on, and the harvest took place on the cusp of winter. Many plants leave their seeds just before winter; even in the capital, it was considered to be rice-harvesting season.

That made it a very busy time for farmers—but they weren't the only ones.

"Miss Maomao, Miss Maomao, could you give us some help with this?"

Chue appeared in Maomao's room and dropped a pile of papers on her desk with a thud. They turned out to be records of harvest yields.

"Miss Chue, Miss Chue, why are you bringing these to me?"

"Good question! It's on the Moon Prince's orders. He said, 'Is there no one who's good with numbers? There's simply too much of this,' so I took some of them. It would be very convenient if Lahan's Brother's brother were here, but he's not, so you'll have to do."

Lahan's Brother's brother. That would work out to Lahan.

Voicing such elaborate quips seemed like too much work, so Maomao let it go. "So you came to me instead," she said. "You know I have other work to do, right?"

"You mean growing your herbs? Or do you mean mixing the medicines and pressing them into little balls? There are a million people who could do that, Miss Maomao. As long as there's nothing only you can handle—sewing up wounds, treating illnesses of unknown origin, maybe surgery—then I don't think you have to work so very hard."

"I'm not sure that justifies dumping bureaucrats' work on me."

"There's no one else who can do it. You've got to pitch in!" Chue drawled. "When it comes to arithmetical work, you have to have a certain amount of trust in the person you entrust it to, don't you?"

"And do you? I mean, trust me to do it?"

“Yes, yes. These are all papers of decently sized necessity that I think should be just fine with you.”

“Could you please not call the necessity...decently sized?”

“Er, why not?” Chue tilted her head, puzzled. But then she said, “I think it might be quite interesting to compare them with last year’s harvest numbers.” *Thud.* She deposited another stack of papers.

“Meaning you want me to compare this year’s numbers with last year’s and find out how short we are on the harvest.”

“I love how you’re always so quick on the uptake, Miss Maomao!” Chue stuck out her tongue playfully. “I’ll go ahead and give instructions to everyone outside.”

“You seem busier than usual, Miss Chue.” Under normal circumstances, she would have bugged the quack doctor until he produced tea and sweets.

“Oh, Miss Chue is always busy! I’m just busier than usual today since we have lots of important visitors. Okay, byeee!”

With that, she trot-trotted out of the room; Maomao could hear her distinctive footsteps retreating down the hall.

“Lots of important visitors, huh?”

Now that Maomao thought about it, things *had* seemed a little livelier than usual. Jinshi had even called Lihaku away, so today they had only their rotating guard. A second guard had been added for the quack, and supposedly there was nothing to worry about. That kid, Gyokujun or whatever, occasionally glared into the medical office, but he didn’t seem inclined to start anything.

I’m not against administrative work, but I don’t love it, Maomao thought. In any case, though, these important visitors were no concern of hers. She would go ahead and do the work she’d been given.

She looked at the pile of papers and put her head in her hands. Maomao just wanted to mess around with medicinal herbs—why did they have to go and be shorthanded?

The most obvious thing was the catastrophic shortfall in the wheat harvest. Lahan’s Brother’s potatoes were just a drop in that particular ocean; they would have to figure out how to get by on nothing but the emergency stores and whatever provisions could be sent to them.

“Think we can swing spreading about eighty percent of this around? Hrm... I just don’t get it,” Maomao muttered to herself.

A proverb held that one should eat to satiety, never to fullness. But to ask those who were used to being full to leave their stomachs partially empty was to invite discontent. Meanwhile, when supplies were unreliable, if some people ate until they were full, others would have to go even hungrier than usual to make up the difference. The poor and their ilk might be able to fill only half their stomachs; they were the ones who would starve first if there wasn't enough food to go around.

If tens of thousands of minds could be brought to think as one, they could almost certainly have gotten by on eighty percent of the normal amount of food. But that wasn't possible; it was just human nature.

No, no, stop.

She couldn't start empathizing with numbers. Letting herself get all depressed about this wouldn't do anyone any good; it would just make her less efficient at doing her job.

She had been at it for about an hour, muttering thoughtfully to herself the whole time, when she noticed someone peering into her room.

"Can I help you?" She asked. She turned to find a young woman —Gyoku-ou's granddaughter, Xiaohong.

Maomao gave her a hard look. She knew what a soft touch the quack was with children; he'd probably let her right into the office.

Xiaohong gave a little jolt and backed away. Well, Maomao didn't want her being frightened of her. She tried to make herself smile, but it must not have been going very well, because the girl backed away even farther.

"Ahem," Maomao said. "I'm afraid we can't have people stopping by the medical office when they have no real business here. Furthermore, this is my personal room..."

That was as conciliatory as Maomao could be.

"There's...a patient," the child said. "Can you look?" Maomao had to strain to hear her.

"A patient? Where is this person?"

"There... Over there." Xiaohong just pointed.

"I'll need you to do more than point."

"Please help him. Uncle Shikyou, he's dying." Xiaohong was struggling not to cry. She was too meek for this to be an act; she seemed to be in earnest.

Maomao wondered what to do. This didn't strike her as a

childish prank. If Shikyou, Gyoku-ou's eldest son, was indeed on death's doorstep, Maomao couldn't possibly just ignore him. But then, someone as important as Shikyou would obviously have a doctor already attending him.

"Tell me something. Why did you come to me? There are plenty of other doctors, right?"

The confusion of the days immediately after the swarm was long since settled. Reprehensible though his behavior might be, there was no way a physician would refuse to see the son of the late governor. And Maomao couldn't imagine any reason a female attendant would be required in this instance.

Most of all, though, she wondered why it was Xiaohong who had come to call her.

"Uncle... Uncle says that if a doctor sees him...he'll be killed."

"Killed?"

Now, that got her attention.

She came out of her room. The quack was drinking tea; too lonely drinking by himself, he'd given some to the guard as well and induced him to sit down. The other guard remained standing outside the door of the office; Lihaku, of course, wasn't there.

The east-side window is hanging open, Maomao observed. That was in the guard's blind spot, and the quack wouldn't have noticed it if he'd been looking right at it. The child seemed to have sneaked up to Maomao's room. Her only real obstacle would have been the guard drinking tea with the quack, but if she could get by him, she would be home free.

Maomao glanced back at the papers on her desk. *I don't think a kid could make heads or tails of them*, she thought, but just for good measure, she swept them together and stuck them in a letter box, which she put in a drawer of the desk.

"All right," she said, turning to Xiaohong. "You said he'd be killed. What do you mean?"

The girl didn't say anything, but was clearly avoiding meeting Maomao's gaze. She'd come to the apothecary because there were no other doctors they could rely on, but in her own childish way she was trying to decide how much it was safe to say.

Frankly, Maomao was starting to hope that this *was* just a prank. Because if it was real...

Maomao actually knew very little about Shikyou. Politically speaking, she didn't even understand what his exact status was, or if

he was friendly or hostile to the central government. From what Chue had said, it sounded like it was best not to have too much to do with him.

In short, the smartest thing for Maomao to do at that moment was...

Ignore the kid's babbling and just do my darn work.

Or so one might think.

Yet at the same time, she feared to imagine the situation in the western capital if Shikyou should perish so soon after Gyoku-ou.

And then there's another problem. Namely, that Maomao wouldn't be able to sleep at night if she knew she had let a man die without even trying to help him. Knowing that good-for-nothing, he would probably whine and cry and try to get her to let him get away without paying for his treatment. She could just walk away then.

All right, what do I do? Maomao fretted and wondered.

There were three main possibilities.

One: what Xiaohong was telling her was either untrue or a mistake, and she was summoning Maomao for some other reason.

Two: what Xiaohong was telling her was true; there had been an attempt on Shikyou's life, and with no one else to turn to, Maomao was the straw Xiaohong had grasped at.

Three: what Xiaohong was telling her was true; there had been an attempt on Shikyou's life, and there was no one else to turn to. However...

There's always the chance that it was the central government that wanted him dead.

Normally, she would report something like this to Jinshi, but in this case she didn't have the luxury of that sort of time.

"Hrmm..."

Xiaohong watched Maomao, her eyes brimming with tears. Why would he use this girl as the messenger? If Gyokujun had shown up with the same request, Maomao would have laughed him out of the office.

Damn it all!

After all her fretting and wondering, Maomao heaved a sigh.

"All right," she said. "Show me where he is."

Maomao caved to Xiaohong's request, but as she went, she left something on her desk: a wooden figure of a masked owl that Chue had carved in a free moment.

Please, don't be the third possibility, she thought.

She packed the minimum of medical instruments into a bag and headed down the stairs. Xiaohong would sneak back out the window.

"Oh, fancy seeing you here. I thought you were going to spend today cooped up in your room," the quack doctor said. The guard drinking tea with him studied her too.

"I just need a change of air. I'm going to go check on the herbs in the greenhouse," she said.

"That sounds nice." The quack continued to brew more tea, with little or nothing in the way of suspicion. The conversation should provide plenty of time for Xiaohong to get back outside.

"Master Lihaku isn't back yet?" Maomao asked.

"No, he's on loan to the Moon Prince. They needed someone good and strong to guard him. Our friend should really be looking after more important people, anyway." The quack seemed to regard Lihaku primarily as there to be his (tea) drinking buddy.

Maomao bowed politely to the guard at the door. "I'm going to the greenhouse. Please take good care of the master physician while I'm out." Looking as nonchalant as she could, she left the medical office and grabbed a basket, just as if she were really going to check on the herbs.

So, what if it really was the central government that tried to take out Shikyou?

There was every possibility—but at the least, she assumed it hadn't been Jinshi's idea. If she'd thought for a minute that he was behind it, she would never have left such an obvious clue as the owl on her desk. Jinshi had kept his peace despite Gyoku-ou's relentless mockery. Shikyou was probably nothing more than a cute little rascal to him.

Xiaohong peeked out from behind a tree. "This way."

Maomao joined Xiaohong and let the girl take the lead. Bureaucrats on business as well as servant men and women around the estate glanced at them as they passed, but no one seemed to take too much interest. They had to be careful not to look too furtive; they would look more like they belonged there if they, well, acted like they belonged there.

This is bad for my heart.

Xiaohong headed for the door that led from the main house toward the administrative office. Maomao thought she might open it and go right in, but then she veered to one side. "This way," she

said again.

They followed the fence that enclosed the administrative office and the main house until they came to a wooded area. The trees were unusually large for the western capital, but they seemed to be less for display and more to block the wind. Maomao recognized the species, but didn't remember what it was called—which suggested it was neither toxic nor had medicinal properties.

"This way!"

Almost hidden amongst the trees was a small door, so overgrown with vines that it wasn't obvious at first glance.

A hidden passage?

Maomao was starting to get the feeling that whatever was going on, Xiaohong hadn't been making it up. The door had a clever locking mechanism, and it took the girl a moment of finagling with the key to open it.

How does she know about this thing?

Maomao would have assumed that a hidden passage like this would have been kept secret from everyone but the family's direct bloodline; even relatives would have been kept in the dark. Yes, Xiaohong was Gyoku-ou's granddaughter, but subsidiary family lines were seen as less important.

Maomao squeezed through the door and found herself in a long, narrow passageway. There was a fence to either side, and overhead a canopy of tree branches.

"Xiaohong..."

There was a man there, his face bloodless and pale—Shikyou. Another child was already with him—the cheeky brat Gyokujun, who was a tearful mess.

Maomao went straight to Shikyou. His abdomen was covered in blood.

"Wh...Who is this?" Shikyou managed.

"The doctor," said Xiaohong.

Shikyou gave Maomao a look at once appraising and searching.

"A doctor! If you're a doctor, then help my father! Make him better!" Gyokujun demanded, sniffling noisily.

"Keep your voice down. Don't shout," Shikyou said, firm with his son despite his condition.

Gyokujun looked at him, wide-eyed, and answered "Yes, sir," in a small voice.

Gyokujun was in the direct family line, for what it was worth,

and he'd probably been told about the secret passageway. The boy, who had never shown much understanding of his own position, probably thought of it as nothing more than a secret base to play in, and must have shown it to Xiaohong just to impress her.

"May I look at your wound?" Maomao asked.

"You? The likes of you is going to examine me?" said Shikyou, who sounded in control in spite of all the blood. Maybe the wound wasn't that bad after all—or maybe he was putting on a brave face. One thing was for sure: the blood on his shirt was expanding steadily.

"I don't particularly care whether I examine you or not, but if we don't stop the bleeding soon, I think you're going to die of blood loss."

Shikyou paused in thought. It was too late to send Xiaohong to find another doctor. It was an open question whether either his son or his niece could locate one of the adults and convince them to come with them. Gyokujun, in particular, might simply bring the quack.

If the injury wasn't really so bad, Shikyou could afford to chase Maomao away—but if it was as serious as it looked, she was his only hope of treatment.

What will I do if the wound isn't bad?

It occurred to her that he might try to kill her on the spot to shut her up. If that happened, then—with apologies to Xiaohong—she would have to use the little girl as a hostage. Shikyou might look like a ruffian, but even he, Maomao hoped, would hesitate to harm the niece who had helped him. Hmm, or maybe his son Gyokujun would make the better shield...

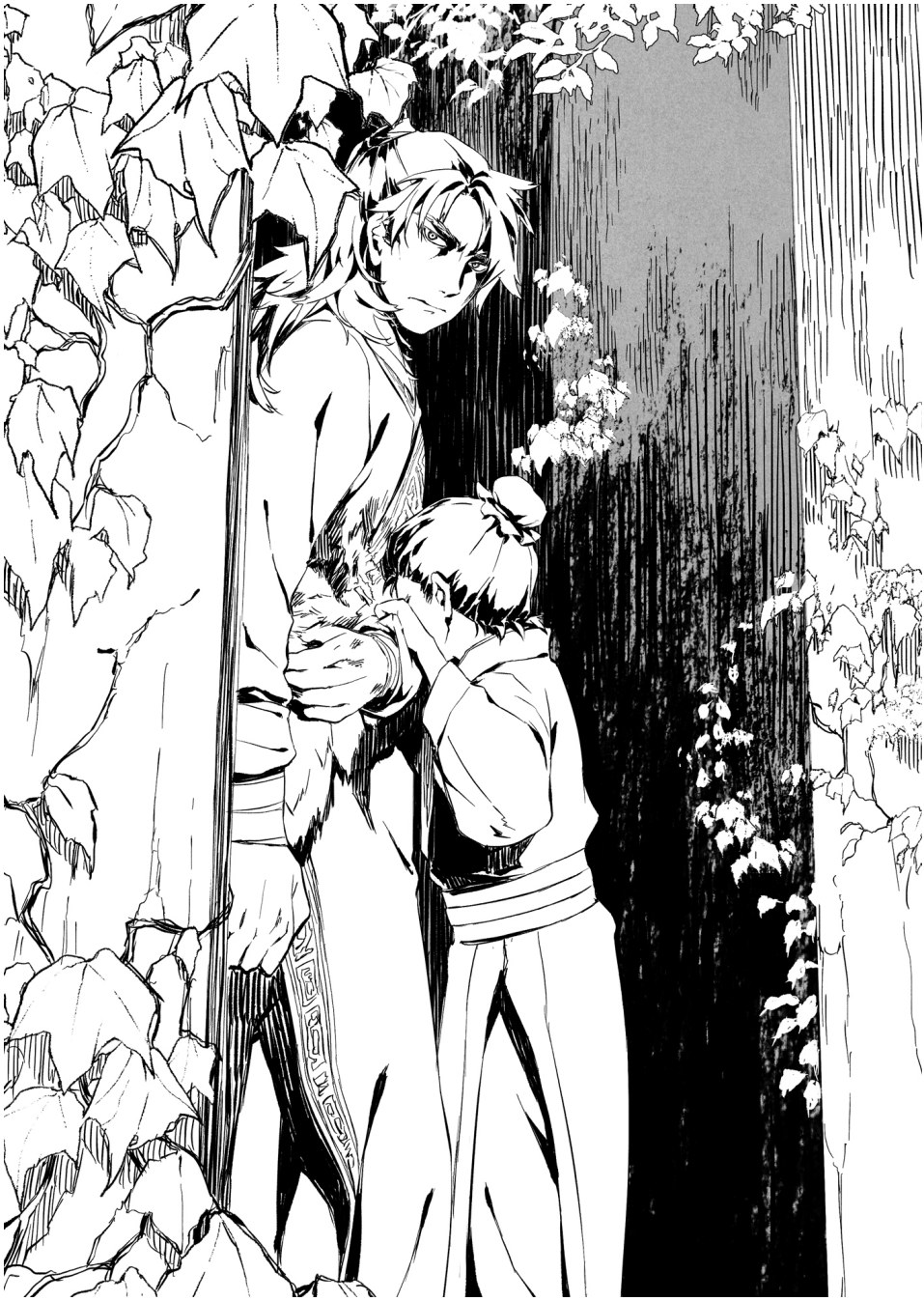
After a long moment, Shikyou said, "All right," and showed her his bloodsoaked belly.

Look at this!

This was a piercing wound if Maomao had ever seen one. The flesh of his side had been torn open. No wonder he was bleeding so heavily.

"Urgh..." Gyokujun mumbled, and Shikyou clapped a hand over the boy's mouth before he could make another noise. Instead, Gyokujun fainted clean away.

Xiaohong covered her mouth and looked away, but at least she understood that she couldn't scream.



Apparently, this man Shikyou was very good at putting on a brave face.

"A poisoned arrow?" Maomao asked after a moment.

Shikyou snorted. "Figured that out, did you?"

"It looks like you thought quickly. How long was it before you were able to pull it out?"

Shikyou had been shot with a poisoned arrow and had torn it out himself. Just imagining it made Maomao a little lightheaded.

"Not even ten seconds."

"Was there any pain? Tingling or numbness?"

"If you wait until you feel the numbness, it's already too late!"

So he knows something about poisons.

If there had been numbness, it would have suggested the distinct possibility of wolfsbane, a powerful poison that could cause death in less than a minute.

"Where were you attacked?" Maomao asked.

"Do you need to know that?"

If he'd been shot in the administrative office's hidden passageway, then the shooter would probably have been firing from the administrative building itself or else the main house. And why had he sent Xiaohong to call Maomao, rather than seeking help from someone nearby himself? Perhaps because he didn't know what an adult sent to call a doctor might do. Even sending a girl so young had been a real gamble.

Should I take this to mean that this was a family quarrel?

If so, then it wasn't the central government that had made the attempt on Shikyou's life, but one of his siblings. There were plenty of people who stood to benefit in terms of the succession and inheritance with the eldest son out of the picture. Xiaohong might be quite fond of Shikyou, but even the girl's own mother was a potential suspect here.

Maomao urged Shikyou onto his side, then took a handkerchief from her robe. Gyokujun was still unconscious, so she left him where he lay.

"I take it this was a dart, not an arrow proper?" Maomao asked as she pressed the cloth to Shikyou's abdomen and waited for the bleeding to stop.

"What makes you say that?"

“You tore it out before there was any pain or numbness, meaning you had immediate reason to think that it might be poisoned. And the weapon was a blowdart, not an arrow, because using a bow and arrow on the grounds of the estate is difficult, isn’t it?”

When the wound finally stopped bleeding, Maomao took out her needle and thread. It was only the muscle and flesh that had been torn; the internal organs were unharmed. Best to sew it up right away, even if the sutures would be a bit rough.

“Where’s the dart?”

Shikyou handed Maomao something wrapped in a cloth. She saw discolored bits of flesh—and a needle head. She could investigate what kind of poison it was later.

“This is going to sting. Just stay with me. Here goes,” she said, and then she started sewing. True to form, Shikyou’s face twisted, but he didn’t cry out. Xiaohong was looking resolutely away from the scene.

“There. That should do it.”

By the time she had finished stitching, Maomao was covered in blood. She’d come here secretly, but if she went back looking like this, everyone would know she had been treating someone for *something*.

I knew I should have just ignored the whole thing, Maomao thought, starting to feel annoyed. She cinched a cloth belt around Shikyou’s abdomen. He groaned aloud, but he would just have to live with it.

That takes care of the emergency treatment. There was still a problem, though—if Shikyou left the confines of the hidden passageway now, it would be impossible to know who was a friend and who was an enemy.

Gyokujun was still out cold, and Shikyou was woozy from blood loss. For the moment, Maomao decided to have a look at the dart: a long, thin, cone-shaped needle.

Can’t tell what kind of poison it is. You wouldn’t know just from looking, of course. She could always prick her finger and see what happened—that would tell her a lot—but this was no time to be conducting human experiments. Maybe she could grab a passing mouse or something and give it a quick stab.

The real problem was that her slapdash intervention wasn’t enough; she couldn’t just leave Shikyou lying there.

The question is, how do we move him without being seen?

Maomao was still fretting over the question when there was a rustling in the underbrush. She turned toward the sound, startled.

A face peeked out from between the trees. "What are you doing there?" the owner drawled. "Oh me, oh my! This looks very interesting indeed."

Maomao only knew one person who talked like *that*. Chue clambered up the fence and looked down at her. "Hoh, hoh! So that's where you went."

"How...did you find this place?" Maomao looked around. She didn't think she had been talking that loudly, but maybe her voice had carried beyond the passageway.

"Oh, please. You, Miss Maomao? Leave your work for a change of air? I didn't believe it for a second. I especially didn't believe you would leave such comparatively important paperwork behind." Chue rubbed the owl figure between her fingers. "I heard that Dear Brother Shikyou was visiting the main house, but I haven't seen hide nor hair of anyone for the last two hours. And there's something in the air at the house and the office. Something strange."

She was frighteningly sharp. How did Chue turn out to be so *capable*? It was also daring of her to refer to "Dear Brother Shikyou" when he was right there, hazy with blood loss or no.

"You look a fright, Miss Maomao! We'll have to run a bath for you."

"I'd rather you took care of the patient and these kids." She indicated Xiaohong and the unconscious Gyokujun.

"Yep, yep." Chue hopped over and down from the fence. At the same moment, the hidden door opened and several men came through. They started trying to pick up Shikyou and the children.

"Come now, Miss Maomao, this way, please. Here's a top you can wear." Chue put her own wrap over Maomao's shoulders. ("All that blood would just attract too much attention!") She seemed her usual, lackadaisical self, and yet...

There's something going on here. Something nagged at Maomao. Not something big—just the sense that Chue was going a little faster than usual. She seemed to be busying herself protecting Maomao, but who was it who really needed the attention right now? Wasn't it the injured Shikyou?

"What's wrong?" Chue asked. "Why'd you stop?"

“Miss Chue,” Maomao said and glanced backward. Two of the men had hefted Shikyou between them. An alarm bell was going off in her head.

I absolutely should not say this.

She should toddle off, take her bath, and pretend not to have seen any of this. That would be the smart play.

But there’s still the chance that it was the central government that tried to have him killed. And I don’t think Jinshi was behind it.

Slowly, Maomao opened her mouth. “Miss Chue,” she said again.

“Yes, Miss Maomao? What is it?” Chue was smiling, just like she always did.

“Where are they taking Master Shikyou?”

There was a beat. Then Chue said, “Heh heh! Miss Maomao.” She clapped a hand on Maomao’s shoulder. “You’re such a handful, you know that? Sometimes you are too smart for your own good.”

Chue’s eyes looked a little wider than usual, and they weren’t smiling.

Chapter 11: The Southern Inn Town

Wonder where I am, Maomao thought. She sat staring at a candle in a two-room suite where Chue had deposited her about half a day before. Xiaohong slept in the bed that stood beside her, while Shikyou and Gyokujun were in the adjoining room.

There was more than just a way *into* the secret passageway between the main house and the administrative office; there was a way out as well. Maomao had done exactly as Chue told her as she shepherded them out of the tunnel, after which Chue had blindfolded Maomao, hustled her into a carriage, and then brought her here—wherever *here* was.

"Just play nice and don't make any trouble," Chue had requested, after which she had gone off somewhere and had yet to come back. At their destination, however, Maomao had found a change of clothes ready for her and was given food as well. Their treatment was, all in all, reasonably polite.

Wish I could say this was the first time this has happened.

As she thought back on another instance of being kidnapped, Maomao drank some highly acidic grape wine they'd been given in lieu of water. Chue knew her tastes well. There was even dried meat and fish to go with the drink.

There was also a bucket along with bandages, painkillers, anti-infectives, and more. Given that Shikyou was in the next room, this seemed to be an implicit command to treat him. Chue had confiscated the poison dart, so Maomao couldn't investigate it at the moment.

Maomao didn't even have it in her to try to run away. Did they think that she would never leave an injured person? Chue seemed to have covered all the bases, and even seemed to know exactly what Maomao was thinking, so running away was unlikely to be productive even if she had wished to try.

What do they want with us? Maomao wondered as she gazed at Xiaohong. The girl had followed them, albeit hesitantly. She had appeared quiet and calm, but her eyes were red and puffy. She had

probably been crying, but as quietly as she could.

Gyokujun had cried, too, but not quietly. The moment he'd regained consciousness, he'd set up a terrible racket weeping and sobbing. He'd then dropped off to sleep, but Maomao's ears still hurt from the howling.

Really, the only thing for her to do was to get down to drinking in earnest, but she was seized by the impulse to take a moment and try to organize what she knew.

First, she would bracket the question of Chue's motivation. There were simply too many possibilities; she would only confuse herself. If she was going to try to get someone's story, she should start with Shikyou in the next room—but unfortunately, he'd developed a fever from his wound and was out of it at the moment. She would have to wait until he was feeling better.

Let's start with a simple question: Where am I?

Now that the children were asleep and things were a little quieter, Maomao took the opportunity to close her eyes. The room was closed off, but she could still hear sounds from outside. A medley of talking voices.

We're in a town. So one thing we can say is that we're not in an isolated shack in the middle of nowhere.

How long had she been in that carriage? Not very long, she thought, but it wasn't a short ride either. More than long enough to get well out of the western capital. Assuming they hadn't taken some roundabout route just to confuse her (which was doubly unlikely since her captors appeared to have other things on their minds), it seemed safe to conclude that they'd gone to one of the neighboring towns.

Their objective was probably to kidnap Shikyou. If they wanted him dead, she presumed they wouldn't have left her bandages and medicines. If anything, this suggested a desire to *protect* Shikyou.

So, do Miss Chue and Shikyou know each other? Are they...partners? Or at least, two people who want the same thing?

And why had they dragged Maomao along? Did they not care if she realized they were in cahoots?

All right, is there anything else? Any other clues?

Besides the medical supplies and the food, there was an old book. It bore a design she only dimly recognized.

But I've seen it somewhere before. Where? She made a thoughtful sound and opened it. It looked like a textbook written in Linese. It

contained moral instruction and the teachings of great people.

Is this some kind of scripture?

So the book contained religious teachings—and that discovery led Maomao to realize where she had seen the design on the cover. It was much like the one in the chapel where Chue had taught her a prayer in a strange, foreign language. Did this book belong to Chue, then?

Maybe not. Miss Chue seems like about the least religious person I can think of.

She was more likely to eat the food offerings right off the altar.

Maomao flipped through the book. Interestingly, it was written in several languages. Linese was first, but farther back she saw a language from the western reaches, along with other characters she didn't even recognize.

"O Lord, do You see us, Lord?"

Maomao recited the words Chue had forced her to memorize. Had Chue herself learned them from this book?

Doesn't feel very relevant right now.

Maomao set the book aside and picked up some dried fish instead. She toasted it over the candle, then took a big bite.

A candle's kind of an indulgence. Of course, if it was a fish-oil lantern, I'd probably be choking from the stink... Hm?

Maomao stopped and listened to the sounds outside. She focused on the cacophony of chatter, desperate to pick out a single subject of conversation, anything, but she couldn't. Which only made sense.

Because...it's not Linese?

There were foreigners outside.

Maomao gave a great sniff. She couldn't be too sure, but she thought she caught a hint of salt.

A town near the western capital where there were foreigners, and salt on the air...

"This must be the southern inn town," she said.

"Exactly," said a voice from behind Maomao, startling her. She turned to find Shikyou standing there, hand pressed to his side. So he was awake. His whole torso was soaked in sweat.

The inn town to the south—this was where Maomao had come to treat the young woman with the rotten tooth. It was populated by many foreigners who weren't yet able to go home.

Shikyou's color was much improved. The brute of a man came

over and stood before Maomao, then grabbed the bottle of wine.

"Don't drink that," she advised.

"I'm thirsty."

"Your bleeding finally stopped. You want it to start up again?"

Alcohol encouraged blood circulation.

Shikyou put the bottle down, thoroughly annoyed, and instead drank from the earthenware pot of water in a corner of the room. He choked it down, wiped a few droplets from his mouth, then looked at Maomao. "I take it from the look on your face that you'd like me to explain how I know where we are."

"If you'd be so kind." Shikyou had barely been conscious when they were brought here; he should be even less sure of their location than Maomao was. How could he be so certain she was right? "Did you and Miss Chue agree ahead of time that this was where you would come?"

"Chue and I want the same thing."

"So you're coconspirators?"

Curse you, Miss Chue!

Maomao had been sure she was hiding something—but she had never imagined it was a connection with Shikyou. At least that would explain why she wanted Maomao to take care of him.

"And what is this thing that you both want?"

"Peace for I-sei Province."

I smell bullshit, Maomao thought—although it was exactly the sort of thing Chue would say with a joke in her voice.

"Interesting aspiration coming from someone who seems so desperate *not* to govern this very province."

"Haven't you heard that everyone has a job they're best at? Get the right person in the right position; that's what makes things run smoothly."

That was Shikyou's way of saying that he believed he didn't have the capacity to govern I-sei Province.

Not that I can't see why he would think that. What she *couldn't* see was...

"Why did you drag me along?"

"Eh. Not mine to say. You should ask Chue yourself." Shikyou took another swig of water, then set the dipper aside. He patted Gyokujun where he lay in the bed, and Xiaohong too. "I've done these kids a bad turn," he said. "Yinxing must be out of her mind by now."

Yinxing. From the way he said the name, Maomao surmised that she was Xiaohong's mother—that would make her Shikyou's younger sister.

"What about Gyokujun's mother?"

"She'll be surprised, but she won't make a scene. Exactly the kind of bride they were looking for."

Maomao tried to picture Gyokujun's mother in her mind's eye, but she could only summon the haziest image; the woman seemed little more than a silhouette.

That's some way to talk about a woman who ended up going through so much. Maybe the marriage was a political match, but Maomao still felt a bit bad for the woman to hear Shikyou talk about her like that.

Once Shikyou was satisfied that his son and niece were safe, he started going through the shelves. Maybe he was hungry. He found some flatbread and stuffed it into his mouth. He was looking pretty energetic for a man whose abdomen had been torn open. Maybe he was acting on a deep-seated instinct to replenish the blood he'd lost. The man lived up to his name; he was like a wild animal.

"I think they'll be making a fuss over my disappearance too," Maomao said. It had been more than half a day since she'd said she was going to go to the greenhouse to get some air. Chue would have known what a disturbance would result from Maomao's abrupt vanishing, yet she'd brought her anyway. Why?

"That's a real shame. But it's not my fault." Shikyou summarily disavowed all responsibility and continued turning the place upside down. He was rewarded with cheese and more dried meat from the shelves.

So Shikyou and Miss Chue had some connection. That suggested that it wasn't the central government that had attacked Shikyou, but some other power. If the attack had come from either the main house or the administrative office, the chances that it was someone on the inside seemed high.

And again, Chue had brought Maomao along with them...

Was it to hide her connection with Shikyou?

No, no. That explanation felt so close, and yet so far. She sensed there was another reason. Throw in the fact that Shikyou apparently knew this was the post town, and...

Were Shikyou and Miss Chue originally supposed to meet *here?*

Was that why Chue had seemed so busy? Maybe she'd dumped

all that paperwork on Maomao in order to keep her from wandering around outside. Yet this was hardly the easiest place for Chue and Shikyou to meet. So why here?

Was he originally planning to meet someone else? And had he been attacked before he could meet them? *Whoever attacked him, maybe they were trying to stop him from getting to whomever he was supposed to see.*

Someone he was supposed to meet here in a town full of foreigners.

The answer practically appeared of its own accord.

Shikyou watched Maomao pondering. "Looks like you're as sharp as you'd expect Grand Commandant Kan's daughter to be," he said.

"That old fart is a complete stranger to me."

"Ha ha ha! I guess young women push back against their fathers in every family." Shikyou laughed merrily and took a bite of meat. "Like I said, you seem like a clever girl. If you figured out that this is the inn town, then you can probably also guess what I'm here to do."

"I'm afraid not. Incidentally, do you think I could go home soon?" Maomao was very interested in leaving before things got any further out of hand. She didn't want this turning into another "Shi clan" thing.

Jinshi has his hands full already anyway!

"Don't worry; no one's going to hurt you. Anyway, just wait until Chue gets back. It won't be long."

Shikyou commenced eating ravenously, quite unbothered by Maomao's presence.

On the cot, Xiaohong's eyes drifted open. "Un...Uncle?"

"Oops, did I wake you? I'm sorry, sweetheart."

"You were hurt! Are you okay?"

"I'm fine. I'm all better now. Thanks to you, I'm all right. Hah! And Gyokujun was too scared to move a muscle. Well, you showed him!"

"Hee hee!"

Shikyou patted Xiaohong's pale hair. "We might not see your mom for a while, but you'll be with your uncle, and that'll be fine, won't it?"

Xiaohong thought about that for a second, then nodded. "Yeah!" She did seem to like Shikyou a lot. At the same time,

Maomao thought she saw another reason Gyokujun tormented Xiaohong. Who wouldn't be jealous if their beloved, nearly absentee father liked their cousin better?

Shikyou lightly toasted some cheese and put it on some bread, then gave it to Xiaohong. She looked hesitant at first, but her uncle had given it to her, after all, so she started taking little bites.

"All right, fair enough," Maomao said. "When is Miss Chue supposed to get here?"

"Within a few days. It won't take longer than that for everything you're imagining to be over. But during that time, you cannot go outside."

"It's a shame I don't have anything to do here."

"It's not like we were planning on having you. I'm assuming you spoke up when you should've kept your mouth shut."

Maomao didn't reply immediately to that. Yes... Yes, she had. If she'd pretended not to know anything instead, would Chue have let her walk placidly back to the medical office?

I'm not actually sure.

One thing looked increasingly certain, though: Chue had been acting with a great deal of freedom. Oh, she'd always shown autonomy, but she was Baryou's wife, so Maomao had always assumed she was acting more or less on Jinshi's orders. But she would never have brought Maomao all the way to this town if she was serving him directly.

Whoever her boss is, it's not him.

And there was something else.

There's a very good chance that their motives and Jinshi's aren't the same.

All right. If Chue and Shikyou wanted the same thing, did that mean Chue was on I-sei's side?

What am I supposed to believe now?

Maomao heaved a sigh and opened the weathered holy book. She just happened to open to the page that said *O Lord, do You see us?*

Chapter 12: The Kingdom of the Ri People

Let's turn back the clock a bit.

"There's someone who craves an audience with you, Moon Prince."

The root of all evil—no, wait, his name was Rikuson—showed up at Jinshi's office. Gyoku-ou's second son, Feilong, was with him.

"I wish you greetings, Moon Prince, and beg to express my unfettered delight to see you well this day."

This was going beyond obsequious, Jinshi thought. What was the big idea? Before, this man had rubbed him the wrong way; recently, he had become positively aggravating. And Rikuson himself seemed perfectly well aware of that fact. He might even have been doing it on purpose.

He was also, however, capable of doing excellent work, so Jinshi had no intention of treating him dismissively. If he let his emotions get the better of him now, it would only mean more work for him in the long run. He had the distinct impression that Rikuson might even *like* it if Jinshi drove him out of his position.

"What do you need?" Jinshi asked. "Is it something that can't be conveyed by more of your paperwork?"

"I thought it might be best to present this matter to you in person, sir." Rikuson glanced pointedly around the room.

"Leave us for a moment," Jinshi said to the guards and bureaucrats with them. Basen was there, too, as was Baryou behind his curtain, but that shouldn't be a problem. Gaoshun was on night-shift guard duty, and currently getting some sleep. "If you think this is going to take very long, please feel free to sit."

"My gratitude for your consideration knows no bounds." Rikuson helped himself to the couch; Feilong sat as well, but at least he had the good grace to look reluctant.

Rikuson had once served the freak strategist, and Jinshi detected no small whiff of the man's former boss in his audacity.

Beside Jinshi, Basen frowned slightly, but he didn't say anything. He still had more growing to do as Jinshi's bodyguard, but he had matured much compared to how he used to be. Except for the duck standing next to him; that was going to have to change.

"A person from a foreign land wishes to meet you, Moon Prince," Rikuson said.

"Who?" Jinshi asked brusquely. Normally, he would have expected to hear about such a matter before Rikuson, not through him. There were only so many ways a foreigner could get into this country. If they had come by sea or were stuck at the post town, Dahai would have brought it up with him.

"Someone from the Ri kingdom."

"The Ri kingdom?"

Jinshi unfurled his mental map. Ri was one of the countries to the north—just north of I-sei Province, in fact. It was part of the federation called Hokuaren.

Hokuaren was made up of several nations, but practically speaking it was a single large country with several smaller satellite states.

The kingdom of the Ri people bordered Li, so it served as a northern buffer with Hokuaren. Anyone foolish enough to pick a fight with Li would find themselves spending an inordinate amount of national resources to do it. At the same time, however, the Ri were menaced by federation nations looking to expand their territory, so Li was forever having to reinforce their troops.

The Ri people seemed to have drawn something of a short straw, and Jinshi sympathized with that, but at the same time, they were not an exceptionally friendly nation. The two lands maintained cordial relations; that was all. Li sometimes imported Ri handicrafts via Shaoh, and sometimes the Ri would send a special emissary in the name of diplomacy.

"Who asked you to intercede in this matter?" Jinshi inquired, continuing not to mince words. Given how Rikuson had been behaving lately, it seemed likely to be quicker than beating around the bush.

It was at this point, however, that Feilong spoke. "Perhaps I may answer that question, sir?" He might have been Gyoku-ou's son, but unlike his father, he seemed fragile.

"You may."

Feilong bowed deeply. "The emissary from the kingdom of the

Ri was presented to us via an introduction from my uncle—my grandfather Gyokuen's second son."

Feilong knew very well that he had quite a few uncles, and rather than give a name, he simply referred to "the second son." Jinshi knew the men's names, but admittedly, the numbers were easier to follow.

"The man in charge of land transport, yes?" Jinshi asked.

"Yes, sir. The second son oversees transport by land, the third son transport by sea."

Unlike Dahai, Jinshi hadn't had much contact with the second son. Small wonder he might reach out to Jinshi through Feilong.

"And what does this emissary from the kingdom of the Ri want with me?"

"As regards that, it seems the emissary would prefer to tell you himself, sir."

Quite in contrast to Feilong's apologetic attitude, Rikuson was smiling openly. He evidently relished the prospect of how Jinshi would respond. Jinshi had half a mind to arrest him for impertinence.

"Must it be me?" Jinshi asked.

"We judged it most prudent to involve the most highly placed person in the western capital," Rikuson said smoothly. Jinshi privately vowed to find some excuse to punish him.

"Why not simply deal with this yourselves, Rikuson? Is your knowledge of the western capital not far more abundant than mine?"

A nice, indirect way of saying that he didn't want to do it and would leave it to them.

Rikuson's smile never faltered. "I question whether my station is high enough for such a duty." A nice, indirect way of saying that he didn't want to do it either.

"Not high enough? Do you mean to suggest someone so important would be sent as an emissary?"

"I should think so, sir," Rikuson replied—still smiling.

Without letting his expression slip in the slightest, Jinshi closed his eyes. He heard someone knocking on a table behind the curtain. That was Baryou's signal. He knocked twice for *yes*, three times for *no*. His two taps now meant he thought that what Rikuson was saying was plausible.

"What makes you say that?" Jinshi asked.

“I think there are several…odd things about the recent situation of the Ri kingdom. No doubt you know what I speak of, Moon Prince; I need not belabor the point.”

Another two taps from Baryou. Well, that settled it. Jinshi braced himself. “Very well. I’ll make time.”

“I thank you.” With deep bows, Rikuson and Feilong left the room.

When he could no longer hear their footsteps, Jinshi finally let out a sigh.

“Moon Prince, are you really going along with their request?” Basen looked disturbed by the idea.

“It’s not a matter of ‘going along.’ I don’t have a choice—and in that case, it’s my duty to do it. And Baryou?”

“Yes, Moon Prince,” came a voice from behind the curtain.

“What is the current situation of the kingdom of the Ri people? Do you have any idea what they might be seeking in this discussion?”

“Two ideas, sir.” They heard Baryou rifling through some papers. “The first is that, like Shaoh, they may be seeking provisions. The kingdom of the Ri people is more northerly than Li, and they will have suffered more drastic food shortages from the swarm than we have.”

Jinshi could well imagine it. It seemed strange, though, that they would turn to a nation with whom they weren’t even especially friendly to supply them with food. “What’s the other possibility?” he asked.

“A succession dispute. Rumor has it that the king of the Ri people has been suffering with illness for the past several years. He has four sons, but the oldest is not the offspring of his queen. My most recent information was that the second son was poised to inherit—but unfortunately, that information isn’t so recent anymore, and I’m not sure what the current state of things is.”

“They wish to involve Li in their succession crisis?”

“Under normal circumstances, I agree, that would be extraordinarily unlikely. However…” Baryou didn’t quite seem to want to say what he was thinking.

“You have a suspicion?” Jinshi prompted.

“Yes, sir. Do you remember when Sir Hulan asked to borrow a doctor the other day?”

He did. He’d granted permission when he heard Maomao

wanted to go.

At that exact moment, Hulan wasn't there; he was carrying a message.

"We sent Maomao, as I recall. Something about seeing a young woman," said Jinshi. Maomao had examined Gyoku-ou's granddaughter, Xiaohong, as well. Jinshi had assumed this was more or less the same thing.

"Yes, sir. As it so happens, that young woman bore a *striking* resemblance to the fourth son of the Ri king..."

Jinshi gave the curtain a cold look. "That wasn't in your report."

"I conferred with my wife, Chue, and we judged it best not to mention."

"That wasn't for you to decide, Elder Brother!"

"Basen, be quiet," Jinshi said before Basen could really start shouting.

"If a man in your position, Moon Prince, *knew* that the fourth prince of another nation was within his own borders, nothing good could come of it in the long run." For what was another nation's prince doing hiding in Li? "There is a great gulf between knowing, not knowing—and pretending not to know."

Something was going on involving another country, but only Jinshi's subordinates knew about it. Meaning that if anything went wrong, Jinshi could easily cut Baryou and the others loose.

Controlling his anger, Jinshi said, "And now I know. What of it?"

"Considering the pointedness of your questions, I decided it would be better for you to feign ignorance than to be truly in the dark." Baryou didn't even try to hide it.

If the Ri emissary was after the fourth prince, Jinshi had half a mind to simply hand him over. That would almost certainly be the safest response for Li—unless the Ri believed that Li was giving the prince political asylum, or even acting as his backer in an attempt to set him up as the heir apparent to the Ri kingdom. That would be very dangerous indeed. Which was presumably why Baryou had decided not to say anything.

That, however, raised a question.

"If that was the fourth prince, mightn't the Ri believe that whomever he had made contact with in Li had actually led him here?"

After a long moment, Baryou said, “Yes, sir.”

“What of the medical assistant who examined the prince?”

“If it was all merely coincidence, then there’s plausible deniability. We’ve taken steps to ensure it.”

He was saying that there would be no harm to the medical assistant—in other words, to Maomao.

“And *is* there plausible deniability?”

“I believe so. As long as we don’t go out of our way to provoke them.”

“Provoke them...” Jinshi muttered. Unfortunately, diplomacy offered plenty of opportunities for provocation. It was so often about tripping each other up, fighting to get yourself into the most advantageous position. It wasn’t pretty, but when you were chasing your own country’s advantage, it was easy to ignore the other party’s feelings.

And when a royal family was involved, nearly anything could devolve into war.

“Why did Hulan want this person examined?”

“I’m afraid I have no idea. But he could have made any number of connections that way.” Baryou’s genuine ignorance was apparent in his voice.

“Moon Prince,” Basen said slowly. He had been quiet until this moment.

“What is it, Basen?”

“Er... I heard something, once...”

“What? What did you hear?”

“Someone said that Sir Hulan is on good terms with his eldest brother, and that he supposedly asked Sir Shikyou to make some foreign connections.”

“That’s strange. I thought Hulan was insisting that his second brother, Feilong, should be the successor.”

“But I gather the first and third sons are cordial with each other, and often talk together.”

Shikyou: the oldest of Gyoku-ou’s four children, regarded by all and sundry as little more than a nose-picking brute. If he was the one who had brought the Ri nation’s fourth prince into Li, then the question of how to respond became more complicated.

“Moon Prince. I think it may behoove you to distance yourself from Sir Shikyou for a while.”

“Yes, I understand.”

For better or worse, the only time Jinshi had really met Shikyou face-to-face so far was at the conference to discuss Gyoku-ou's inheritance.

"As long as it's someone else involved, there are still ways around this problem. But if it turns out you're connected to the matter, sir, then this won't just be I-sei Province's problem—Li itself will be seen as picking a fight with the Ri kingdom."

One certainly wanted to avoid that. And to that end, Baryou was prepared to become the lizard's tail.

"Shikyou..." Jinshi heaved another sigh. This would weigh heavily on him as he met the Ri emissary.

The meeting was to be held neither at the administrative office nor the main house, but at the western capital's most luxurious restaurant—the entirety of which had been rented out. It would be conducted in the presence of Feilong and his uncle, Gyokuen's second son.

The Ri emissary and his party gave Jinshi appraising looks. They hid it well, affecting genuine politeness, but Jinshi had spent enough time being sized up in the rear palace that he saw right through the act.

Li was many times—many tens of times—more powerful than the Ri kingdom, but the knowledge that the Ri had a massive federation behind them gave the emissary a big head. What's more, the Ri people were, by and large, brawnier and hairier than the Linese. Jinshi could see the contempt in the emissary's eyes.

For that reason, he made sure to choose someone especially tall and imposing as his bodyguard. Lihaku might have made a good choice—he could think on his feet, and Jinshi had some trust in him. But he had been with Maomao when she had gone to see the person who *might* have been the fourth prince, so for safety's sake, Jinshi decided to have Lihaku wait in the wings for now.

Basen had grown substantially of late, but he still hadn't reached his full height, and he had that hairless baby face. Jinshi instructed him to dress not as a soldier, but like one of the administrators. Basen didn't like it much, but acquiesced when Jinshi said it was to throw the Ri delegation off. Nobody would suspect a clean-shaven bureaucrat to be capable of taking on a dozen men with his bare hands.

Rikuson recused himself from the meeting, claiming he still had

work to attend to. Jinshi had thought this would be a good moment to have him along, but at least it looked like he didn't mean to cause any trouble. Jinshi had the distinct sense that the man had grown rather more carefree lately.

He asked Hulan, Chue, and even Baryou not to be present, since they had all been on the trip to see the maybe-prince. He would particularly miss Baryou and Chue, who with their gift for languages would have been helpful interpreters, but there was no way around it.

Given this dearth of close aides, Jinshi was very grateful that Gaoshun would be with him.

Such were the trials of diplomacy. If they were simply going to stand there and accuse each other of things, then there was no need to worry about the feelings of a country that wasn't even a friend.

Nonetheless, Jinshi knew that his own face would help in a negotiation. He was shown to the room, and the moment the emissary and his party saw him, they froze. Then they stared intently at the scar on his right cheek and heaved sighs of disappointment.

People sometimes mocked him for his looks, but it seemed the smile of a celestial nymph worked just as well on foreigners as it did on his compatriots. It might have been even more wildly effective had he been a woman, but that would have brought its own dangers, as Jinshi well knew. People not infrequently remarked that it was a good thing he had been born a man, so that the country need not fall to its knees under his beauty. If heaven was going to give him a gift, Jinshi often thought, he wished it had given him some actual talent, instead of just a pleasant appearance for people to make light of.

As often as his looks had made his life more difficult, however, they had just as often helped him. If he could use them now, then he would.

As emissary, the Ri had sent a man who much resembled an ordinary Linese, with yellowish skin and brownish hair. Only his thicker body hair and largeish nose and eyes gave away his foreign birth.

He was refreshingly direct about the purpose of his visit. "A nobleman from our country is missing. Do you know anything about it?"

The subject was as expected. The man's tone seemed abrupt,

but he was speaking through an interpreter, so it was hard to tell how respectful he was actually being. The emissary avoided mentioning the person's age and referred to "a nobleman" instead of a member of the royal family, but the question aligned with what Jinshi had been told.

"There is a possibility of kidnapping. If you know anything, we would like you to tell us immediately." To all appearances, the emissary looked deeply concerned for this missing noble, from the furrow of his eyebrows to the slight trembling of his hands. If this was an act, he was doing a very good job.

Had the freak strategist been here, he would have known the truth immediately, no matter how good an actor the man might be —but Jinshi didn't have the courage to bring *him* to a diplomatic meeting. It would be like lighting a pipe by a powder store.

Jinshi had to consider all the potential possibilities.

"If my older brother has caused any kind of problem, please allow me to be part of this discussion," Feilong said with a grim look.

"My nephew's indiscretion would be my responsibility as well. I urge you to make a fair judgment, without regard for us personally." This came from Gyokuen's second son.

As blood relatives, they were prepared to accept punishment, but what was "fair" in this case was hard to say. Normally, it would be impossible to make such a judgment without better information. If priorities had to be chosen, however—what should come first?

Suppose for a moment that the noble in question was indeed the fourth prince. If they took the emissary's words at face value, then the prince had been kidnapped and brought to Li. It would be most natural to assume Shikyou had been behind it.

If he had been involved in the abduction of a foreign royal, there would be no protecting him, even if he was the son of the former governor. Worse, everyone knew what a black sheep he was. It would be best not to be involved with him, but be ready to simply cast him aside if there was any trouble at all.

It might sound cold, but that was diplomacy. Letting a man run free when he caused strife with another nation or even sowed the seeds of war would result in tens or hundreds of times more deaths than merely his own.

Suppose the emissary was not telling the truth, however. Then the proposition was different.

Without clear information, it could be impossible to decide what to do. Jinshi would have to order Shikyou to be put under observation for some time, perhaps even barred from entering the main house or the administrative office.

Even though they were meeting in a restaurant, the talks ultimately concluded with hardly a bite being eaten. The emissary and his party said that they would be staying at an inn for a while. Jinshi didn't know just how long that was, but he would have to keep his guard up.

Sadly, it's always at moments like this that the trouble happens.

Jinshi left the restaurant and climbed into his carriage. He requested some water to wash down the meal he had barely eaten. Basen had loosened the collar of his administrator's outfit; apparently he found it constraining. Thankfully, they hadn't needed him in the end.

Someone knocked on the carriage door.

"What is it?" Basen looked suspiciously out the window.

"A message, sir," said the person outside, who handed them a letter with a simple wax seal. It was from Baryou.

"What does it say?" Basen asked Jinshi, who opened the letter and looked at it.

He pressed a hand to his forehead. "This is very bad timing."

The letter stated that Shikyou had appeared at the main house and insisted on coming in, until it became a fight.

Why did the trouble always have to happen at moments like this? Jinshi couldn't believe it.

And then he read the rest of the letter.

"Master Jinshi, you don't look so good..."

"That idiot. That absolute idiot!"

Baryou informed him that Shikyou had been wounded and run off—and that Maomao had gone to treat him.

Chapter 13: The *Biaoshi*

Maomao spent the next day treating Shikyou, looking after Xiaohong, and disciplining Gyokujun. Frankly, there wasn't much else to do anyway. Even looking after Xiaohong really only entailed sharing some of the food they were given with her, making sure she brushed her teeth after they had eaten, and helping her bathe, although all they had was a washcloth. She was calm and surprisingly mature for her age.

She could hardly have been more different from Gyokujun—he was the real troublemaker.

"Hey, you! How 'm I supposed to eat this bread? It's rock-hard!"

"Then don't eat it." Maomao took the bread off his plate and put it on a shelf where he wouldn't be able to reach it.

"Y-You jerk! What am I supposed to eat, then?!"

"You're the one who said you didn't want it." She tore off a piece of the tough bread and chewed it.

"Dad! Daaad! Do you hear how this woman talks to me? Hang her!"

"I'm not in charge of anything, so I can't hang anyone—and besides, it's your own fault for not eating what you were given. Look, Xiaohong is eating *her* food."

Oops, that's gonna backfire.

Gyokujun thought he would find an ally in his father, but Shikyou told him to be more like Xiaohong instead. The resentment would only make him bully her worse. He might be an irredeemable little shit, but Maomao thought the situation in which he was brought up had something to do with it.

Gyokujun spent so much energy being angry that he soon got tired and fell asleep. Meanwhile, Xiaohong took advantage of the moment to cuddle up with her uncle.

"Uncle, what does this say?" she asked. She had opened the weathered old scriptures and placed the book on Shikyou's knees.

"It says *shrine*," he replied. "It's the place you always go to pay your respects, Xiaohong."

“What about this?”

“Ah, now, this one...”

Uncle and niece seemed to have a genuine rapport. Xiaohong had seemed so withdrawn, but with Shikyou she was friendly. As for Shikyou, he worked hard to make sure his niece didn’t grow bored in the cramped confines of their small rooms.

Maybe he wanted a daughter instead of a son? Maomao wondered. She wasn’t so boorish as to make the suggestion aloud. Instead, she pulled the covers up over Gyokujun, who lay flopped on the bed. Yes, some believed that a certain amount of harshness was necessary to raise young men, but that was only when their fathers were there for them.

“Good! How about we play marbles next?”

“Yeah!”

They laid out some nuts and stones on the floor and flicked them around. It was a simple game, but Xiaohong enjoyed it. If Maomao hadn’t known better, she could have taken them for an actual father and daughter. Maybe if he treated Gyokujun this way, she thought.

Isn’t Xiaohong unhappy to be separated from her parents? Maomao wondered, thinking that maybe the girl was tougher than she looked.

She found herself thinking quite a lot, given that there wasn’t much else to do. The same man as always brought them their food; he doubled as their guard. He was at least kind enough to give them plenty of water.

When the guard brought their meals, he also brought letters that Shikyou read without showing Maomao, then immediately burned in the candle flame. Maomao mourned the waste of precious paper, but whatever was in those letters, he obviously didn’t want her to know.

She strongly suspected that the disappearances of herself, Gyokujun, and Xiaohong had the household in an uproar, but where she was, nothing much seemed to change. Any commotion had failed to reach the post town.

If the freak strategist learned that Maomao was gone, she expected him to march straight here and turn the place upside down. Chue must be doing quite a job to throw him off the trail.

Shikyou would manfully entertain Gyokujun and Xiaohong until they got tired and fell asleep. Gyokujun liked to hear stories of his

father's travels, and Shikyou would regale him with tales of his adventures the way other people might sing lullabies. Xiaohong would listen along quietly.

One night, when the kids were soundly asleep, Shikyou turned to Maomao. "I know you've put together a lot of the pieces already. Do you have any questions for me?"

"I wouldn't expect an answer if I asked you, and if you did answer, I suspect I would wish you hadn't."

There were too many things in Maomao's life that she ended up wishing she didn't know. On this occasion, she'd brought this on herself by being too perceptive about Chue.

"All right. I'll tell you one thing. I'm leaving here tomorrow morning, and by evening, you'll be released."

"Very reassuring news."

In the morning, Shikyou would leave, and Maomao would be free in the evening. Presumably that meant that whatever the trouble was, it would be resolved during the day.

Please tell me it doesn't involve attacking anything.

Maybe they had been planning an assault and had isolated Maomao so she wouldn't be able to tell Jinshi of their plans. That made a certain kind of sense...

But somehow I don't think that's what they're up to.

If it were, the entire situation would smell fishier.

"I'll be best off if I can act on my own," Shikyou said. "If I asked you to look after Gyokujun and Xiaohong for me...would you do it?"

"I don't think it counts as asking when I can't possibly refuse. But while we're both being frank, I'm not a big fan of Gyokujun."

"They're in your hands."

Maomao meant to take care of the kids in any event, but surely she could be allowed a gripe.

Shikyou, she couldn't help thinking, was nothing like his father Gyoku-ou. Yes, they resembled each other in looks, and they each carried themselves with a certain heroism—but that heroic air came more naturally to Shikyou. Gyoku-ou hadn't been born with it; it was something he had affected. For Shikyou, that charisma came from within. Maomao could feel it.

Yet this larger-than-life man was hiding something, something he was willing to hole up in a little room in an inn town to conceal. Maomao had some idea what it might be, but to find out for sure

would be immensely dangerous, and she knew it—so she didn't ask.

Instead she said, "As long as I'll be seen safely back to the western capital, I'll return to the main house with Lady Xiaohong. Then what do I do? I'm sure they're going to question me about this, but I have no idea what to say."

"Tell them the truth. Tell them that I was wounded, and you treated me. Say that you then accompanied me because I needed further care. That's all."

"And Gyokujun and Lady Xiaohong?" (She wasn't about to refer to the little shit with a respectful title.)

"Just tell them whatever. Say they came with because they're so close to me."

That would never work. Maomao just knew Xiaohong's mother was going to put the screws to her; she was going to need to think of a better excuse than that.

I'm not so sure it'll work on Jinshi either.

This was sounding like more and more of a headache with each passing moment. Still, if she could go back tomorrow, then that was enough for her. Nothing to do but go to sleep and wait for the next day to come.

The next morning, Maomao awoke to a rustling sound. A woman and several men were standing there, all dressed like *biaoshi*—that is, mercenaries whose business was the guarding of money, treasure, or very important people.

"You're awake?" asked Shikyou. He was dressed like the others—transformed from a mere brute to an armed guard. It turned out his attitude didn't need much adjustment. He stood ramrod straight, however; Maomao would never have guessed there was a gash in his abdomen.

"Your wound might open if you stand too tall," she told him.

"I have a bandage cinched around it good and tight. A little bleeding won't do it any harm, will it?"

Maomao didn't like the obvious assumption that he was going to do some serious physical exertion whether she advised it or not, but she had given him her opinion. She took no further responsibility.

Instead, she shook Xiaohong and Gyokujun awake. It was better than having to deal with them weeping and sobbing when they woke up to find Shikyou gone.

“Huh? Where’s Dad going?” Gyokujun mumbled.

“Maybe to work?” Xiaohong said.

While Maomao held their hands tight, making sure they didn’t go anywhere, another biaoshi, a man, walked in and whispered to the lone woman.

The woman knelt down in front of Maomao and said in a low, steady voice, “I think we should hurry. It seems we’ve been noticed.”

“Noticed? What does that mean?” Maomao asked.

“I’m so terribly sorry,” she replied. “I’m afraid we won’t be able to escort you to the western capital.”

Oh, you have got to be kidding me. Maomao scowled, but there was no time for complaining. All she could do was follow the lady biaoshi’s instructions.

“Bring your clothes, if you’d be so kind. You and I will be sticking together from here on out.”

After a second, Maomao nodded—she had no other choice. “All right.”

They got into a waiting vehicle—not one of the armored wagons the biaoshi usually used, but an ordinary covered wagon. Maomao was given a set of very fine clothing, along with an outfit for Xiaohong. She helped the girl change before putting on her own new clothes.

“We’re not going home?” Gyokujun ventured.

“It’ll just be a little longer than we thought. Here. Clothes.” Maomao tossed his new outfit at him.

“You have to help me!”

“You can’t dress yourself? Come on!”

Gyokujun grumbled, but he angrily put on the outfit.

“Where are we going?” Maomao asked the biaoshi.

“Fear not. Whatsoever may happen, I will keep you alive.”

That didn’t answer her question. If nothing else, the fact that it was only the lady biaoshi in the back of the wagon with them seemed to be a gesture of consideration toward Maomao and the children.

“We’ll take a different path from Master Shikyou. If we can successfully stay hidden, we should be able to work our way back to the western capital.”

“All right.”

They couldn’t see what was going on outside from under the

wagon's cover. Xiaohong huddled close to Maomao, while the lady biaoshi sat crossed-legged and never let go of the curved blade in her hand.

Maomao took the woman to be somewhere in her thirties, perhaps, with perfect posture and sharp gaze. Particularly notable were her suntanned skin and clear, low voice. Even accounting for her general failure to recall faces, Maomao thought she would have remembered this woman.

For the foreseeable future, she would be trusting this stranger with her life.

Chapter 14: Disguise

Maomao guessed they had been in the wagon for nearly four hours. They weren't moving very quickly, but even so, the horses must have been getting tired. The wagon had to be a heavy load, even though there were two animals drawing it along. On any ordinary trip, it would certainly be time to let them rest. A rest of which, at the moment, Maomao saw no sign.

Did that mean there might be someone chasing them?

"Are we there yet? Are we there *yet*? I'm tiiired!" Gyokujun groused. He was lying with his arms and legs spread out in the middle of the wagon.

"Uh-huh," Maomao said, ignoring him and looking outside.

That was exactly when the wagon came to a clattering halt.

Maomao caught her breath. The lady biaoshi asked the driver, "Why'd you stop?"

"Surely we can let the horses rest for a spell? You see them staring at us—they're desperate for a drink," the driver replied. Maomao looked out and found that the two horses pulling the vehicle did indeed seem to be giving them dirty looks.

"All right," the biaoshi said. She came into the back and told Maomao that they would rest at the next village. "The three of you will go into the village. Your cover story is that you're a mother and her children."

"Why should we have to play pretend? Take me home! I command you!" Gyokujun said, agitated. He'd managed to dress himself, which was great and all, but he'd folded over the front the wrong way, and Maomao had had to make him take it off and do it right.

"You won't be able to go back to the western capital for a while. I mean, you could, but they'd tie you up and throw you in jail. Do you want that?" The woman spoke politely, but her eyes said she was telling the absolute truth.

"Y-You think they could do that to me?! My father would never let them get away with it!"

"It's on Master Shikyou's orders."

Gyokujun went silent, but his eyes brimmed with tears and he stuck out his lower lip.

Much as it satisfied Maomao to see him squirm, she was in the same position as he was. "Will people believe that these two could be my kids?" she asked with a look at Xiaohong and Gyokujun. Not only did they look nothing like her, she wasn't old enough to have two children their ages.

"Women commonly have children at a younger age in I-sei Province than in the central region. If anyone says they don't look like you, just say they take after their father."

Hmm.

They might have different-colored hair, but Gyokujun and Xiaohong were cousins, so they somewhat resembled each other at least.

Wasting no time, the lady biaoshi pulled out some cosmetics. "Another thing women do here is wear makeup. A little bit will go a long way in helping you blend in."

She started working with a practiced hand; she was an artist and Maomao's face was her canvas. The base she used wasn't pure white, but had a red tint, making Maomao's skin look a bit more like the locals'.

"Question," Maomao said. "Would it really not be better for us to go directly back to the western capital? I can't imagine our going home would have that much of an impact on anything." She was very curious what these people had been so desperate to hide that they would confine her for days on end, but she couldn't imagine what it might be—which meant she couldn't tell Jinshi what it was either. Maybe Chue had put in a good word for them and that was why they hadn't been killed to shut them up.

"There's a reason we can't send you home right now, but it's not for Master Shikyou's sake. It's for the Moon Prince's. For what it's worth, I do sincerely regret that you got wrapped up in this."

It's for Jinshi?

That left Maomao even more confused, but there was nothing to do but go along.

Thoroughly made up, Maomao now looked several years older than her real age, while some careful work to her eyes and eyebrows gave her a passing resemblance to her "children." She had

to admit—she was impressed.

When they got to town, they not only changed their horses for two new ones, but got an entirely new wagon. They acquired a second driver as well, a burly man who probably doubled as a guard. As for the wagon, it bore the biaoshis' crest. "It's a pleasure to serve you, ma'am. Young master. My young lady."

"All right," the lady biaoshi said. "I'm going to go into town to buy what we need. Do you think you can wait in the wagon?"

Gyokujun promptly stuck his head out. "I'm going too!"

Maomao grabbed him by the scruff of the neck. "You're *definitely* waiting here."

"I'm going toooo!"

The little shit flailed and fought. Just when Maomao was seriously considering tying him up, the biaoshi took her hand. "If he's that insistent, then I'll take him. We would be much worse off if he ran away the moment I was out of sight."

Maomao looked at Gyokujun and Xiaohong. Xiaohong, she suspected, would wait patiently in the wagon—but Gyokujun?

Yeah... He would run away. For sure.

"All right. Thank you," she said, choosing to trust the woman. Gyokujun gave her a triumphant look as they left. Then he turned back to the biaoshi. "Buy me some snacks while we're in town!"

"I'm afraid there won't be time."

Gyokujun looked shocked to be so firmly rebuffed, but that wasn't Maomao's problem. She had to admit, though, that it was going to be pretty boring just sitting here in the wagon.

"Xiaohong, you don't need to use the toilet?"

"No. I'm okay."

"All right."

Xiaohong had started playing marbles by herself.

You know, that reminds me...

"That place where your uncle was hurt, that's a hidden tunnel, right? Did Gyokujun tell you about it?" Maomao had been wondering ever since the day of the attack.

"Nu-uh," said Xiaohong.

"A family member, then? You don't normally tell just anyone about a passage like that."

"Uncle told me."

"Your uncle? You mean Shikyou?"

Xiaohong shook her head. "Uncle Hulan."

“Hulan?” Maomao repeated.

“Uh-huh. He said Uncle Shikyou was in danger and I should help him.”

“What?!” Maomao said, breaking out in a sweat.

“Luckily Gyokujun was there. He showed me where to go.”

Wait… What does this mean?

Why hadn’t Hulan helped Shikyou himself? Why had a child like Xiaohong come to summon Maomao? Who had attacked Shikyou?

That son of a…

She didn’t know what Hulan was playing at—but she knew he was in deep.

Chapter 15: Priorities

There was nothing so unpleasant as being made to dance to someone else's tune. Maomao swore that the first thing she would do when she got back to the western capital was get permission to deck Hulan.

In the meantime, her journey continued, and she still had no idea what she should do.

Where in the world are we going?

She, Gyokujun, and Xiaohong rode along in the covered wagon with the lady biaoshi, resting, moving, resting, and spending the night in whatever town or village where they could find an inn.

Unlike the central region, it was all grassy plains here, so Maomao quickly lost track of where they were; they might as well have been going in circles. By checking the position of the sun every so often, however, she was able to deduce that they were heading in a generally westerly direction.

On the way, they occasionally paid obeisance at temples or stopped to buy clothes. Maomao realized that a certain amount of pointless busywork was necessary if she was to be taken for an unsophisticated housewife.

The detours served another purpose too—appeasing the endlessly curious children, who would never have shut up otherwise. Even Maomao was happy to check out the street stalls they passed, full of meat skewers and unfamiliar foods. The only real disappointment was that there weren't as many as there might've been before; the insect swarm had taken its toll.

"Ugh! I don't wanna *walk* anymore! Get me a palanquin!"

"I'm hungry! I want some fruit!"

"You expect me to eat bread this hard?"

How many times now had she dropped a knuckle on Gyokujun's whiny head? She'd always heard that boys were more trouble than girls, but now she knew it in her bones. Xiaohong was polite and quiet and did what Maomao said.

Once, as the wagon trundled along, Maomao turned to the

biaoshi and said, “Is it safe for me to ask where we’re going now?”

“If I told you the name of the village, would you know where it was?”

Well, she had Maomao there.

“As I think you’ve realized, we’re traveling west. Your home is in I-sei Province’s second-largest city. Your husband is a businessman, but thanks to the swarm, he’s got no business anymore. You may not know much about the world, ‘ma’am,’ but you know this can’t go on, so you used the last of your savings to hire a biaoshi, and are on your way to your family to tell them that you’re in dire straits.”

The cover story turned out to be more in depth than Maomao had expected.

“All right. I understand,” she said. In other words, their destination was the province’s second-largest city, or perhaps somewhere on the way.

“May not know much about the world.” Real nice.

Maomao might have resented the characterization, but the fact was that she had never been west of I-sei Province. Her eyes lit up when she saw the strange food, drinks, and handicrafts. There was hardly any fish to eat, but there were plenty of snakes for sale to make up for it. One place had served live scorpions, but Maomao had been prevented from partaking—it wasn’t something an out-of-her-depth housewife would eat, she was told. She had so, so wanted to, though.

At first, Gyokujun and Xiaohong had been ill at ease being separated from Shikyou, but being endowed with the natural curiosity of young children, they were still more than happy to explore the stalls with Maomao.

Xiaohong is so much better behaved than that little shit.

Maomao had expected her to complain more, or demand things she wanted, but she did no such thing. Maomao wasn’t a fan of children. In fact, she actively disliked them. She was an advocate of applying “the punishment of the iron fist” when children refused to do as they were told—but when it came to Xiaohong, she found she never needed to entertain the possibility. If anything, she felt like she was dealing with an adult. Maomao couldn’t help wondering how Xiaohong had been raised.

“Is it just me, or does Xiaohong get all the attention around here?” Gyokujun asked her, glowering.

“Why should I fuss over you? Would it make you feel better if I patted you on the head and went ‘There, there’? Come here—I’ll pat your head so hard your hair’ll come out!”

“N-No way! That’s not what I meant!”

Maomao fussed over Gyokujun, all right—like tickling his sides as mercilessly as she could.

The lady biaoshi turned out to be right—nobody seemed to question the story that Maomao, Gyokujun, and Xiaohong were a family. In addition to changing the tone of her skin, they added some blemishes around her eyes, much like how she did her freckles. Xiaohong’s light hair lent credence to the story that her father had foreign blood, and explained why she didn’t look like her mother. As for Gyokujun, he looked enough like Xiaohong to pass as her brother.

“I can’t say you seem very intimidated by any of this,” the biaoshi said as they ate one day. They were at a small restaurant with nine tables that sat four people each. The second floor doubled as an inn, and the place would even groom the horses for them.

“Why should I? It’s not every day you get a chance to see the interior,” Maomao replied. They would have to travel the same road whether she was anxious about it or not—better, then, to take it easy until they came face-to-face with their problems. Maomao dipped some bread in a lamb stew and took a bite. It was meaty, but not very salty. For vegetables, there were a handful of root vegetables and garlic chives. Water was by and large too precious to drink; instead, there was a wide variety of alcohol. Despite the extra expense, they ordered water for Gyokujun and Xiaohong.

“I want a grape water!” Gyokujun said.

“Well, there isn’t any.”

“But I want it!”

Gyokujun had a bit of a temper, and was quick to whine when things didn’t go his way. Every time Maomao slammed him with a knuckle, though, he burst into tears; she wished he would hurry up and learn his lesson.

“It seems awfully empty around here,” Maomao said, looking around the restaurant.

“I agree,” the biaoshi replied.

The building was quiet. Maomao presumed it had been built because this area was a trade nexus, but the swarm of insects had impacted more than just the food supply—it had also struck at

trade, the economic heart of this region. That might also explain why the handful of customers who were there all seemed to be in a bad mood.

I don't think any of them look like the brawling type offhand, she thought, although she observed one person sitting in a corner nursing some alcohol. They'd been glancing in the direction of Maomao's party for a while now. *Trying to decide who to target, maybe?*

Maomao's table had just two women and two children at it. Yes, they had the pair of drivers who doubled as bodyguards, but they made it a point not to eat at the same time. Unfortunately, a small party of women and children might as well have been carrying a sign that said *Please rob us*.

"Maybe we should hire some more biaoshi?" Maomao suggested.

"There should be another guard I can trust in the next town."

Meaning, the lady biaoshi didn't want to take on just anyone. No unknown quantities. Maomao got the distinct impression that, woman or not, this biaoshi would be a force to be reckoned with.

"Maybe we should have at least one of the drivers eat with us?" Having a man at the table would give people a different impression of them.

"A lot of people in I-sei Province think it's inappropriate for a woman to share a table with a man from outside her family." In other words, it wouldn't play to their cover. "I'm going to have to make preparations for our move to the next town. I'll leave one of the guards with you. Don't come out of your room."

"Understood."

Maomao would have liked to explore this area a bit, but she was going to do as the biaoshi said. They were a long way from the central region, and safety was not guaranteed.

"I know it's boring just to wait around. Read a book or something," the biaoshi said.

A book. Sure.

The only book Maomao had with her at the moment was the scriptures from where she'd been confined. It had just sort of turned up in the covered wagon. She suspected Xiaohong had brought it.

Maomao had no particular interest in the holy text, but with absolutely nothing else to do, *read a book* it was. Naturally, Gyokujun set to bullying Xiaohong. So much for reading quietly.

The biaoshi came back a couple of hours later. In addition to whatever else she had done, she'd also been shopping, and had a large bag with her. She didn't look very happy, though.

Maomao had grown tired of reading and was playing with Xiaohong. The best they could muster were marbles played with shells and stones, or cat's cradle—games that passed the time but did little else. Gyokujun had huddled up in a corner. Maybe his head hurt from Maomao smacking it.

"Doesn't look like you're bursting with good news," Maomao said.

"I'm afraid not. The plan was for us to meet my comrade in the next town, but he seems to be off the trade route at the moment, and I couldn't get any information on him." The biaoshi placed the large bag in front of Maomao.

"Off the trade route?" Maomao asked, opening the bag as she spoke. Inside she found provisions like dried meat, furs to keep off the cold—and medicinal herbs. *That* made her eyes sparkle.

"The merchants decided to avoid the main road; it's full of bandits. There were already enough of them, and their numbers have only grown since the swarm. No food, no money, and lots of people out of a job. With the road so dangerous, better to bypass it and head for the next town after that."

"Ah..."

The bandits might be starving, but if they stole all the food from all the merchants, soon there would be nothing left to steal—but some of them weren't thinking that far ahead.

"But I thought there was a biaoshi agency that you could trust in the next town?" Maomao was positively grinning now as she laid out the herbs. All her caution had turned to medicine.

The other woman shook her head. "I said I knew a guard there, not another biaoshi."

"Oh. Right..."

It was true; she hadn't specified a biaoshi. Maomao sniffed the herbs industriously. Xiaohong copied her, but quickly pressed a hand to her nose and turned away—they were very pungent herbs.

"You know," Maomao said, "I've been starting to wonder. Hasn't it been long enough that it should be safe to return to the western capital?"

"I can't be sure of that right now. My mission is to send you

home only once the danger is completely past. I can't send you back on a whim." The biaoshi sounded very firm. Maomao still didn't understand exactly why she was dragging them all over creation, but on this point at least Maomao sensed that she was telling the truth. "Unfortunately, I'm also not sure what to do if we can't make contact with my friend in the next town. I'm considering going there anyway, on the understanding that it will entail some danger. What do you think?"

Maomao, now checking to make sure the herbs were dry, groaned. "It doesn't sound like I have much of a choice. For one thing, we're going to run out of money if we just keep wandering the back roads of I-sei Province."

"It does take a bit of the load off my shoulders to hear you say that."

From the folds of her robes, the biaoshi produced a small jar: a delicately glazed piece hardly larger than the palm of her hand.

"What's that?" Maomao asked. She put down the herbs and squinted at it.

"A nerve toxin. It can't stand up to much heat, so don't get it too warm, if you'd be so kind."

"You gathered snake venom without me? I would have helped!" Maomao took the jar and gave it a gentle shake. She heard a faint *splish*. She could only imagine how many snakes the woman must have caught to gather so much venom. Snake venom was less stable than mineral poisons and readily lost its potency, particularly when heated. Maomao had learned that from a book—and had confirmed it by her own experience.

"I'm impressed you guessed it was snake venom. You'd be surprised how easy it is to come by at the butcher's."

In this inland area, fish was rare; snake tasted similar and was rich in valuable nutrients.

"Any scorpion in there?" Maomao asked.

"A few drops, yes."

Maomao realized the biaoshi was serious. The more varieties of poison there were in a concoction, the more difficult it was to devise an antidote.

"Take this too." The biaoshi handed her a needle wrapped in cloth. The needle was fixed in place so that as long as the cloth was wrapped around it, it could be carried safely. "If anything happens, prioritize your own life."

So in other words, no matter what, survive. Is that it?

Even, the biaoshi was telling her, if she had to kill someone to do it.

Chapter 16: The Liar

Ever since he had heard that Maomao had gone to see Shikyou, a cloud had hung over Jinshi as he did his work.

“Perhaps I might suggest a brief rest, sir?” Gaoshun was trying to be considerate, but rest was the last thing Jinshi wanted.

“You think I could sleep?” he asked.

“A politician is one who can sleep no matter the circumstances.”

Fair enough, but Jinshi was not enough of an adult for his reason to be able to overmaster his emotions. In fact, he thought he was doing very well not to just stop working entirely.

“At first they said she’d be back within a few days. But how long has it been now?”

“Ten days, sir.”

“What’s *taking* so long?!”

He knew perfectly well what the reason was; he was taking his frustration out on Gaoshun.

Ten days before, when Jinshi had met with the emissary from the kingdom of the Ri people, the matter of the kingdom’s fourth prince had come up. Well, not explicitly, but that was almost certainly what they had been talking about.

If someone who stood in the line of succession was in another country—a country that wasn’t even specifically friendly—that was a serious problem. This situation was hardly better for Li than it was for the Ri people. They were the ones who had sent an emissary uninvited, but anything that happened might well be taken as a provocation. Gyoku-ou, he would have tried to bull through the matter—he probably wouldn’t even have deigned to meet the emissary. But Jinshi did things differently. He wanted this to go as smoothly as possible, and he trusted that his subordinates wanted the same thing.

Now, however, suspicion for kidnapping the fourth prince had fallen on one of the more prominent people in the western capital. And the day Shikyou had chosen to come to the main house was the

exact day on which Jinshi was sitting down to a banquet with the Ri emissary. It was a ballsy thing to do—and could even be viewed as an intentional attempt to disrupt the talks.

It was understandable, then, that Baryou and the others under Jinshi would try to prevent Jinshi and Shikyou from having any contact, so that Jinshi could cut them all loose, Shikyou included, if the need arose. It might seem cruel, but that was what the politicians Gaoshun spoke of would do.

The moment someone he cared about had gotten involved, though, he had begun to panic. Maomao, blast it all, couldn't have picked a worse moment to get tangled up with Shikyou. It had been immediately after he had come to the main house and gone on something of a rampage. She'd given him medical treatment, which would make it easy to deem her his coconspirator. They might have been able to wave away a bit of emergency first aid, but she'd actually sewn him up with a needle and thread. At that point, it got difficult to pretend that someone else had done the work.

As for Shikyou himself, Jinshi really didn't know that much about the man. He was reputed to be a brute, but Jinshi wasn't sure how true the rumors were. The question on his mind was, if he had to cast Shikyou away, how would he protect Maomao? The conclusion he hit upon was to claim that Shikyou had threatened her and forced her to treat him. He'd coerced her into coming with him. That would do for an extenuating circumstance.

Why, then, had it been necessary to leave the main house?

"If Master Shikyou is innocent of wrongdoing, then the culprit was someone on the inside," Baryou said. Someone, some person on the estate, had targeted Shikyou—and until they knew exactly who, it had been decided that for Maomao's safety, they couldn't have her here. That was why Chue had led her away.

Chue—there was someone else they hadn't seen the past several days. Jinshi had ordered her to protect Maomao. He hoped she was using every means at her disposal to do exactly that.

As for what *he* could do, priority had to go to returning the fourth prince to the Ri kingdom. After hearing that someone fitting the prince's description had been seen at the post town, Jinshi had gone there himself—only to find the inn where the person had been staying was empty.

Trying to track the prince after that soon revealed that Jinshi was not the only one on the young man's trail. Another force was

after him. Ultimately, not only had Jinshi been unable to hand the prince over to the emissary, but the murmurings that Shikyou had kidnapped him had grown ever darker.

That had been six days ago.

Even now, neither Shikyou nor Maomao had returned to the main house. Jinshi knew that so long as their safety could not be assured here, they would stay on the move, looking for some other harbor. Now, in addition to all his other chores, Jinshi was concerned with dealing with the Ri kingdom—and smoking out the traitor in the main house.

"Perhaps a breath of fresh air," he said.

"Understood, sir," Gaoshun replied. Jinshi left the office, Gaoshun and Basen walking behind him. Behind Basen walked the duck, but by this point Jinshi was tired of coming up with clever things to say about it.

Jinshi remembered how splendid the gardens of Gyokuen's western-capital estate had always been, but now more than half had been turned into farm fields, their teary-eyed gardeners working the ground with their hoes.

He could see someone in the open-air pavilion that occupied one of the few remaining patches of garden. Wondering who it might be, he squinted, and could just make out two old farts.

"Ah, Sir Quack. You've found a tasty-looking treat there."

"Hoo hoo hoo! You have a distinguished eye, my dear commander. It's sweet potatoes from this year's harvest, crushed and mixed with butter and honey. The key is to brown them just right."

A tea party was in progress, attended by the freak strategist—that is to say, Lakan—and the good doctor. The good doctor was, to be perfectly honest, not actually that good at doctoring, but he did have a way with people.

A man with a hoe interjected himself into the conversation. "Excuse me, Master Physician! I thought I told you we couldn't use those sweet potatoes yet!" It was Lahan's Brother. Also near the pavilion were the doctor's bodyguard and Lakan's aide.

"Aw, I'm sorry. The idea came to me, and then I just... Well, what do you say, my dear Lahan's Brother? Try some!" The physician shoved some of the potato treat into Lahan's Brother's mouth.

"Mrrgh... Hmm. The flavor's all right, but I tell you, if you'd let

them ripen a bit, you wouldn't need sugar or honey. Hrm, that stuff I had with the distilled liquor in it was better."

"That's true enough, but, well, maybe we needn't worry. What do you think, my dear strategist? Isn't it lovely?"

"Yes, it's good. But leave the alcohol out of it."

"Ah, of course, you don't hold your drink well, do you? And to think, your daughter loves it so!"

"Now listen here, doc. You didn't make that with Maomao's wine, did you?"

"Goodness, no! I specially requested the kitchen to share some of theirs. But I didn't tell the young lady, because if she found out, she would have drunk it all!"

"Yes, well... Yes. She might just do that," Lahan's Brother admitted.

"I should say so. I hear distilled liquor is perfect for grilling meat, too, and I'd love to try it... But to tell you the truth, I'm a little scared," the physician said.

"Scared of what?" Lahan's Brother asked.

"The alcohol is so strong. If I put it on the meat, won't the fire just go *fwoosh!* and go everywhere?"

"Better make sure you have some water on hand."

The whole time Lahan's Brother and the physician were chatting, Lakan munched his way through the snack, until some got stuck in his throat. His aide rushed over and pounded him on the back. He was obviously used to this—Jinshi surmised that it happened with some regularity.

"Perhaps we should give them some space, Moon Prince," Gaoshun suggested.

"Good idea," said Jinshi. He'd managed to keep Maomao's absence a secret from Lakan over the past several days. Back during the swarm it had been simple enough—Lakan had had work to do, and it had distracted him. But now it was proving trickier.

That was when he heard the strategist ask, "Don't you think it's about time for Maomao to be getting home?"

"Hmmm," the physician replied. "All I heard was that she was going to the port town with Miss Chue to buy medicine. You know how she gets about medicine. That shopping trip might never end!" The quack didn't question the story, which was exactly why it worked on Lakan: the doctor believed it completely.

Lakan was not, by any stretch of the imagination, a man suited

to ordinary civilian life. He spent half his time asleep, and when he was awake, he was usually playing around. He hated to so much as look at paperwork, and he had no idea how to just "play along" in social situations. In one thing, however, no one in Li could match him: his ability to judge character. He could assess the suitability of his subordinates at a glance, as if he were looking at Shogi pieces on a game board. Perhaps it was an extension of that ability that made it impossible to lie to Lakan or try to throw him off your trail.

Jinshi knew that if he had to confront the strategist in person, the old fart would know in a second that Jinshi had been deceiving him. Thus he endeavored to avoid him as studiously as possible.

It was as they were heading back to the office that Jinshi heard a faintly ridiculous "Quack!" The duck trailing behind Basen had found a frog in the garden.

"Come on, let's go!" Basen snapped and tried to grab the bird, but he hesitated for an instant. Being far stronger than the average person, he was probably worried that he might crush the duck if he grabbed her too heedlessly.

The frog hopped away and the duck darted after it, flapping its wings as it went—which attracted the attention of the people in the pavilion.

"Oh! Moon Prince," the master physician said, his cheeks flushing pink.

"It's the Moon Prince..." Lahan's Brother looked away, almost awkwardly. He hadn't had a proper audience with Jinshi since before he'd gone on his cross-country trek around I-sei Province.

"The *Moon Prince*?" demanded Lakan. He didn't sound terribly happy about it. He got up from his seat and stomped over to Jinshi.

Jinshi put on the courteous smile he'd perfected in the rear palace. Gaoshun, too, kept a careful poker face; Basen, meanwhile, was busy chasing after his duck.

"Fancy meeting you here," Lakan said. "I've been trying to find you for days. Where have you been hiding?"

"I've been working in my office, and occasionally taking a brief constitutional outside. You must have missed me."

He wasn't lying—and he wasn't telling the truth.

Jinshi was sweating about what to do. If the strategist asked him point-blank about Maomao, there would be no dissembling. This was a man who thought nothing of smashing through the wall of the rear palace to get to his daughter.

Lakan went straight for the jugular. “Say, you haven’t seen Maomao around, have you?” No matter how Jinshi responded, the jig would be up.

He was trying to decide what to do when the duck came racing between them.

“B-Bad Jofu! Come back here!”

“Basen...” Gaoshun growled at his son. Basen screeched to a halt, but the duck tore on, wings flapping, until she ran smack into someone coming down the covered hallway.

“Yikes! Where did you come from?”

It was Hulan, carrying an armload of papers and now left with a webbed footprint on his clothing.

This time the duck stopped, and Basen finally swooped her up in his arms. “I’m so sorry. This is the result of my own negligence,” he said, and he really meant it.

“Oh, please, don’t worry,” Hulan replied.

“Are those for Rikuson?” Jinshi asked—a nice, safe question. Rikuson liked to foist work on Jinshi, but two could play at that game. Stupendous quantities of paperwork passed back and forth between them—but Jinshi didn’t recall there being quite as much today as what Hulan was holding.

“Yes, sir,” Hulan said, polite as always. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary.

Yet Lakan adjusted his monocle and said, “Hey, now. Why would you lie about that?”

“Lie?” Jinshi asked, looking at him.

“He’s not going to see Rikuson. So where *are* you going?”

“Oh, heavens. I have a whole panoply of little chores that take me here, there, and everywhere.”

Hulan often took on grunt work in the interest of making sure everything was done just so. Naturally, the tasks might see him go to all kinds of places.

But that didn’t seem to be the lie Lakan was talking about. “Then let me ask you,” the strategist said. “Do you know anything about my daughter?”

Hulan looked puzzled. “Lady Maomao? I think she’s gone to the port town on a shopping trip.”

Lakan strode over to Hulan and gave a great sweep of his hand. The papers Hulan was holding went flying everywhere.

“M-Master Lakan?! Whatever is the matter?” asked the master

physician, who was terrified of conflict in any form.

"Sir Quack. Do you think you could bring me that distilled alcohol you were talking about? Right now?"

"Y-Yes, of course." The physician scuttled back to the medical office.

"D'you know what I'm up to here, boy?" Lakan asked Hulan.

"I'm afraid not. Perhaps you could tell me, sir?" Hulan looked very confused, and he wasn't the only one. Jinshi and the others had no idea what was going on either.

"Tell me, Moon Prince. Did Maomao go shopping at the port town?"

Jinshi didn't say it out loud, but he shook his head no. No point denying it now.

"Then was this little liar aware that Maomao was somewhere else?"

"He shouldn't have been..."

Jinshi had told only a handful of his most trusted subordinates about Maomao. Even Basen hadn't known, for fear that he might give the game away. So, no, Hulan shouldn't have known about Maomao's situation. Why did he know that his answer was untrue?

"Hulan..." Jinshi's eyes narrowed, and he fixed his gaze on the humble young man.

That was when the master physician returned with a bottle. "Master Lakan, I brought the drink!"

"Why, thank you." Lakan took the bottle and popped out the cork, keeping his face turned away so he wouldn't get drunk on the fumes. Then he flipped the bottle upside down, emptying its contents all over the papers.

"Oh! Those poor papers... Whatever are you doing?" asked the physician, who was perhaps the only one who could question Lakan so directly to his face.

"This," the strategist replied. His aide was already there, holding a flint. Lakan took it and struck it in the direction of the alcohol-drenched papers. They immediately lit in a great burst of flame.

"My goodness! Master Rikuson's papers!" Hulan exclaimed.

"Forget his papers! I want you to tell me why you knew something you should never have known!" Lakan demanded, his face red in the light of the fire.

"I didn't know anything. It just seemed strange. Why would

they send someone so prized as Lady Maomao on a days-long shopping expedition?"

"Let's try a different question, then. Did you try to entrap Maomao?"

This time Hulan didn't say anything.

"Did you try to test her?"

Still he was silent.

Jinshi saw that Lakan's interrogation wasn't going to get anywhere at this rate. He was too fixated on one and only one thing: Maomao. There was a better question in this situation.

"Hulan... Was Shikyou in your way?"

At Jinshi's question, Hulan smiled ever so faintly. "Yes. He's not suited to be our father's successor."

"So little suited that you would kill him?"

"It seemed like the way to avoid any trouble in the future. The way to ensure work would go as planned."

Now it was Lakan's turn to be silent.

"Say my brother was alive. What use would it be if people saw him as the successor to our father, Gyoku-ou?"

Jinshi had been looking for a traitor on the inside—but he still didn't know what that traitor was thinking.

"Brother Shikyou is unnecessary if the western capital is to be run as smoothly as possible. I simply sought to remove that which we didn't need." Hulan smiled widely, then abruptly took off his shoes. "My body may burn, but I shall be content."

Still smiling, he stepped into the conflagration of paperwork.

"What are you doing?!" Basen lunged forward to pull him out of the flames, but Hulan dodged him, dropping to all fours and clinging to the floor. Even as his clothes, his hair, his very skin scorched, he smiled.

"You must be crazy!" Lahan's Brother rushed over with some pond water and doused Hulan. Gaoshun was in action, too, issuing orders to the guards and Lakan's aide.

As for the good doctor, he was out cold, a froth of bubbles around his mouth.

Lakan gave Hulan an icy stare where he crouched on the ground.

"What would drive you to this?" Jinshi asked. He was startled by how rational he found himself as he regarded this incomprehensible creature.

“Cloth! Give me a cloth!” Basen shouted. He wrapped Hulan and dragged him to the medical office. The physician wasn’t going to be doing any treating, so they would have to get someone to come from the clinic in town.

“Gaoshun,” Jinshi said.

“Yes, sir.”

“Shikyou is innocent. I think it might be advantageous in this case to cooperate with him to find the fourth prince.”

“As you say, sir.”

Gaoshun was already moving. Lakan turned to Jinshi, looking unimpressed. “Hoh. Is that your play, Moon Prince? It’s always possible this Shikyou of yours is plotting something.”

“We’ll find that out readily if you accompany us, will we not, Sir Lakan? Or would you delay your daughter’s rescue simply because you don’t like me?”

“Well! Look who’s grown a spine.”

“I had to. *Someone* put me through my paces.”

He had found his traitor. What to do next, then? Jinshi sprang into action—it was the best way to get Maomao back.

Chapter 17: A Town of Faith

Maomao and her little band headed for the next town as planned. She soon understood why there were supposed to be so many bandits here. By the standards of the western region, the greenery was lush and the trees plentiful. A copse, grove, or forest would serve as an excellent place for an ambush.

"I-sei Province may look like it's all grass and deserts, but there are forests too," said the lady biaoshi as she pointed out the window. Her explanation was partly for Maomao's benefit, but also, Maomao suspected, to keep the children from getting bored. Wagon travel was not easy for kids who weren't even ten years old. The biaoshi, however, had put out woven straw mats to ease the rattling and shaking, and so the kids could sleep at any time. Maomao appreciated them too; they certainly made it easier on her behind.

"Is that because we're near the heights?" Maomao asked.

"That's right. Rain and snowmelt from the high ground runs down here as fresh water. That irrigates the forests, and the forests attract the people."

"Don't the people cut down the forests?" It surprised Maomao that they didn't; in Shihoku Province, where excellent timber had been plentiful, the mountainsides had been stripped bare, such that logging had to be forbidden by decree.

"Not many of these trees are actually good building material. Mostly people gather nuts from them, or else use the woods as windbreaks."

"Well, that's just ordinary agriculture, isn't it?" Maomao asked. Xiaohong was doing something in between nodding her head and shaking it; she didn't seem to quite follow the conversation. Gyokujun, looking downright uninterested, had flopped down on the mats. "I thought maybe there was something unique about this area that had turned it into a trade route."

"There is. This," the biaoshi said. She put a book in front of Maomao: the weathered old scriptures. "There's a church in the next town."

Now it made sense. Maomao didn't know much about religion. She was a practical person herself, not inclined to believe in things she couldn't see. She was convinced that gods and immortals couldn't possibly exist. But she wouldn't go so far as to tell others not to believe in them. People needed a haven, something to support them—and sometimes that took the form of a silent statue.

Truth be told, sometimes religion even helped in the pleasure district. Maomao had seen more than one courtesan on the cusp of death comforted by the thought that a land of peace and safety awaited her on the other side. Maomao remembered how they went, their belief enabling them to smile despite the agony of their last days.

As long as believers don't cause trouble for anyone else, that's all I ask.

They were welcome to worship whatever deities, superhumans, or faeries they wished as far as Maomao was concerned. But there were some who put those characters to a wicked purpose, and many who were taken in by such schemes. Gods were like medicine: they could be dangerous if used the wrong way.

So much for Maomao's theological outlook. They kept a vigilant watch on the road lest they be attacked by bandits, but they made the passage safely.

"We'll be there soon," the biaoshi said. Rooftops had begun to appear beyond the trees, along with a building at least three stories tall.

"Is that the church?" Maomao asked.

"Yes." The biaoshi said something to the driver, and the wagon rolled to a halt.

"Um…we're not there yet," said Xiaohong, mystified. She could see the town, but they had stopped well before they reached it.

"I'm going to go into town first and have a look. I want all of you to stay with the wagon," said the biaoshi.

"Is that safe?" Maomao asked, starting to feel anxious.

"I'll leave the two guards with you."

Not really what I meant.

The biaoshi was a pro, so maybe it was disrespectful of an amateur like Maomao to worry about *her* safety.

"If everything looks all right, I'll come back to get you, so just wait here until I do."

"And…what if you don't come back?"

Xiaohong went wide-eyed at Maomao's question and she looked at the lady biaoshi.

"You run," the other woman said with absolute conviction. "Don't get any silly ideas about rescuing me."

Run... Easy for her to say.

Maomao was by no means an accomplished athlete; the best she could hope to manage would be to hide behind a tree somewhere and try not to breathe. She would have to get help from the drivers.

Being a biaoshi doesn't seem like a great career choice, she thought. Yes, they were paid well, but what salary could possibly be worth your life? And it might well cost your life, since biaoshi dealt in their own trustworthiness. Once they took a job, they had to see it through, even if it turned deadly.

Maomao opened one of the bags of herbs she'd bought, hoping to calm her nerves. They were divided into little cloth-wrapped bundles for ease of use; she tucked them among the folds of her robes as she always did. She still had a handful left over from the western capital, too, including a few of the mushrooms that made you viciously drunk, which she'd dried out. She planned to savor them with a tipple when they got back to the city.

Over the past few days, Maomao had noticed that whenever she was working with her herbs, Xiaohong would have nothing to do with her. She would give Maomao an annoyed look, then start playing pebble-marbles by herself. Gyokujun would still give his cousin a hard time occasionally, but not nearly as hard as he used to, so Maomao left them alone. She had no intention of getting overprotective.

There came two quick raps: someone knocking on the wagon.

"Yes? What is it?" Maomao asked, sticking her head out from under the cover.

"Pardon me." It was one of the guards, a clean-shaven man about forty years old. He always came across as gentle; he had a daughter himself and was especially kind to Xiaohong. The other driver, for his part, was a younger man who didn't speak much, but he did sometimes play-fight with Gyokujun.

"It's just a small thing," the kindly man said, "but I thought you might enjoy this." He rolled a pine cone into the wagon.

"A pine cone!" Xiaohong exclaimed, her eyes shining.

"*Haisongzi*!" Maomao exclaimed, eyes equally bright.

"Who cares?" Gyokujun said, the only one of them to show no

interest whatsoever.

"Did you find that around here?" Maomao demanded. She was far more forceful than either of the children, causing the kindly guard to take a step back.

"Er, y-yes. There's a big pine tree just nearby."

"May I go and harvest more of them?!"

"Erm... If you promise not to leave my side, then..."

"Perfect!"

Maomao leaped down from the wagon, and Xiaohong followed.

They picked up every pine cone they could find. They had been at it for about half an hour, and a small pile of pine cones had formed near Maomao. She didn't care about the pine cones themselves, but she was very interested in the nuts inside them. Pine nuts, called *haisongzi* or *songzi-ren* in herbal medicine, were very high in nutrients, including oils and fats. Toast them gently and they acquired a lovely sweetness.

The only downside is that the nuts are so tiny it's hard to get them out, Maomao thought, but a simple matter of physical labor was not going to stop her when it came to her medicines. Xiaohong collected the pine cones, which Maomao would immediately begin stripping of their scales. Much as Xiaohong seemed to enjoy collecting the pine cones, she was less thrilled to see Maomao dissect her prizes. She tucked one particularly well-formed specimen she was especially happy with into the folds of her robes.

The middle-aged guard stayed close at hand, while the other guard ate some food at the wagon and occasionally checked on Gyokujun, who was sleeping in the back.

Maomao was just thinking that she needed to get the seeds out of her pile of pine cone scales when the middle-aged guard tugged on her sleeve. "Excuse me," he said. He had Xiaohong in his arms.

"What's the matter?"

The guard didn't say anything, but glanced toward the wagon. There was someone there: a thirtyish man.

"I'm a messenger. I was told to come and call you," the newcomer said.

"Yeah? All right." The younger guard jumped down off the driver's bench and, with a single, unstudied motion, lunged forward and slashed the messenger's throat.

Maomao jumped; for a second, she couldn't grasp what had happened. Beside her, the kindly guard had his hands over

Xiaohong's eyes and mouth.

"Into the forest," Maomao's escort said, and then he set off running, cradling Xiaohong. The younger guard grabbed the sleeping Gyokujun from the wagon and carried him, stuffing a cloth in the boy's mouth so that he wouldn't bite his tongue or shout. These men knew what they were doing.

I see. Maomao realized why the guard had attacked the alleged messenger. She remembered what the lady biaoshi had said: *"If everything looks all right, I'll come back to get you, so just wait here until I do."* But it wasn't the biaoshi who had come; it was someone claiming to be a messenger. Which meant there had been trouble.

Covered in an unpleasant sweat, Maomao had no choice but to follow the guard. They fled through the woods, stopping to hide each time they heard pursuers' footsteps behind them. The pursuit parties were never large, and the two guards dealt with them.

But how long could this go on?

"Ugh, that hurts." The younger guard had sustained an injury to his arm; someone among the most recent band of pursuers had gotten a slash in.

Maomao daubed the wound with some coagulant herbs she had available and bandaged it. There didn't appear to be damage to the nerves, but it would slow the man's reactions.

More to the point, they had no idea how many more people might be after them, or if running was going to be enough to get them out of this.

In a game of cat and mouse, Maomao's group was at a disadvantage. They had two guards, yes, but they also had two kids who had to be carried during the flight. Again and again, their pursuers nearly caught them.

Gyokujun was crying and didn't seem to understand what was going on, but Maomao didn't take the cloth out of his mouth. The last thing she wanted was for him to start howling and get them all captured. Xiaohong was silent, but her whole body shook with fear. Her breath came hard and it was clear she was nearing her physical limit.

We're as good as cornered. And if Maomao, who was new to all this, realized that, then the two guards must be very well aware.

"All right, listen," the kindly guard said to Maomao, his face grim. "There are too many of them. To be honest with you, this job isn't worth what we were paid anymore. We might be able to evade

them a little longer, but as long as we stay in these woods, protecting the three of you is going to be impossible."

Maomao didn't say anything; she knew the man was right. Even if they did leave the forest, they'd abandoned their wagon, along with their horses. They had hardly any water or food, and getting back to the last town they'd visited would be a tall order. Yet neither could they return to the wagon, and they certainly couldn't go into the new town nearby.

This was not looking good.

"Again, in all honesty, I think continuing to run would be pointless. I didn't become a biaoshi because I'm some great fighter. You see me—it's my cowardice that's kept me alive!"

Maomao could understand that too. Those who knew how to evade danger made better guards than those who charged into the teeth of it.

"What I'm saying is...we're leaving you here. We've failed in our mission."

A bit too honest for his own good, this guy. Maomao could hardly have blamed him if he'd run off and left them without explaining a thing. She respected this more than him just fleeing.

After a moment, she sighed. "All right," she said. "Just to be sure, I suppose it wouldn't do any good to say we'll pay you extra?"

The words crossed her mind: *I'll pay any price!* What a cliché.

Maybe there was a thin ray of hope, a possibility that they could finagle horses somewhere and the guards could lead Maomao and the kids out of this...

But the men looked at each other and shook their heads. The younger one gestured at his wounded arm. "The best possibility is that we could capture a couple of the wild horses who use the nearby watering hole. He and I could ride them, but could you ride an untamed horse without a saddle? I don't think we could ride two to a horse and still hope to escape the enemy. With my arm like this, I think I'll be lucky to be able to ride by myself."

Maomao was quiet for a moment. Now she really wished she had learned how to ride a horse.

But where there's life, there's hope. In truth, these two guards had proved themselves remarkably good-hearted.

They didn't betray us and turn us over to our pursuers, or steal the last of our money and leave us.

They had sincerely tried to fulfill their duty, and when they

judged that that wasn't possible, they'd told Maomao as much.

"You're still young, and a woman. There's every chance they'll leave you alive even if they capture you."

Maomao was quiet again. *Alive. Sure.*

There was no telling what they would do to her. Bandits weren't exactly renowned for their hospitality. But one thing was certain: if they captured these guards, they would kill them.

"I understand. But could you possibly take one person with you? One of the children?"

"What do you mean?" asked the middle-aged guard, already getting ready to go.

Maomao took out a bandage and tore a piece off. "Xiaohong, what's your mother's name?"

"Yinxing."

Right, that was it. Unlike the other siblings, Maomao reflected, it wasn't an animal-related name. Instead, it meant "silver star." She wrote a short note on the bandage.

"Is it all right if I borrow this?" Maomao asked Xiaohong, taking her hair decoration.

"Uh-huh."

Maomao wrapped the bandage around the hair ornament, then gave it to Gyokujun, so that he had a cloth in his hands as well as his mouth.

"Mmmrf!"

Gyokujun seemed to want to say something, but Maomao ignored him.

"Could you possibly take just the young man back to the western capital?" she asked.

"This kid? Alone?"

"Yes."

Maomao was, as they had said, a woman; Xiaohong was, too, and lovely to boot. Gyokujun, however, was a young man, and not smart enough to play the game when he had to. If they were caught, the first thing he would probably do was inform the pursuers of who his father was.

There's no telling if Shikyou's name would work for us or against us.

She considered the possibility that the bandits would keep them alive to ask for ransom, but then again, a lot of people seemed to have grudges against Shikyou. And hostages so rarely made it home

in one piece.

Maomao determined that having Gyokujun with them would dramatically increase their chances of getting killed. She would have liked to give priority to the younger Xiaohong, but the situation forced her hand.

"Would it be too hard to take just the one child?" Maomao felt in the folds of her robes, looking for something, anything to pay them with. She had a few small coins, but hardly more than pocket change. That left...

Argh. This is such a waste. I hate to do this.

Agonized, she took out a small pouch. Inside were several pearls—imperfect, but pearls just the same. She'd intended to use them for medicinal purposes, but the situation, again, dictated their fate.

"A-Are these pearls?" the guard asked.

"Yes. I assure you, they're real."

The two guards swallowed heavily.

God, this is such a waste!

There were enough pearls in that pouch (Maomao had heard) to buy a small house.

Finally, she took the wad from Gyokujun's mouth.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?!" he demanded.

"Xiaohong and I are staying in this forest," she told him. "*You're* going back to the western capital with these guards. And you're going to give Xiaohong's mother this." She pointed to the hair ornament.

"What? I'm going by myself?"

"That's it! Time's up!" Maomao shoved the cloth back in Gyokujun's mouth, then bound his hands and feet so he wouldn't be able to fight.

The middle-aged guard hefted the thrashing Gyokujun onto his back and secured him with a rope tied fast around them both, as though Gyokujun were riding piggyback.

"I'm sorry about this," the guard said, and then he and his companion left Maomao and Xiaohong in the woods. Xiaohong clung to Maomao and mournfully watched them go. She was smart enough to understand that the guards—and Gyokujun—had left them there.

"Sorry. Maybe I should have asked you," Maomao said.

"This is the best way?" Xiaohong asked.

“I hope so.”

All right, then. Dallying would get them nowhere; action was everything.

Maomao looked around. She saw no sign of anyone, but their pursuers would be there soon enough. Very well—she found a large tree and dug into the ground, making a small hole. They climbed in and covered themselves with leaves.

“We’re hiding?” Xiaohong asked.

“For the moment, yes.”

“But what if they find us?”

“There’s no *if* about it.”

It was only a matter of time until they were spotted. But maybe...

A short while later, they heard footsteps charge past. Everyone Maomao could see was armed—some carried swords, but some had farming implements.

There’s two possible outcomes here—they kill us to shut us up, or take us as hostages. Maomao didn’t know which way this was going to go. Nor how they would be treated if they were taken.

“Sorry about this,” Maomao whispered to Xiaohong. Then she balled up the sleeve of her outfit and stuffed it into Xiaohong’s mouth.

One set of footsteps approached. Maomao stole a glance out of the corner of her eye.

Not him.

She could feel Xiaohong’s heart pounding as she held her. The girl could probably sense Maomao’s heart racing the same way. Although they were deep into autumn and the air was getting cold, Maomao felt inordinately warm. She almost worried that steam would rise off her and give them away.

Not him either.

Each time a bandit approached, Maomao held her breath, but one by one she let them go past. Their pursuers were being careless. Maomao and Xiaohong had been accompanied by a pair of guards until a few minutes ago; most likely, nobody suspected the two girls might be hiding a stone’s throw away.

Not yet. Wait for it...

Maomao waited and waited.

Finally, a man with a curved blade approached. He had thick facial and body hair; what was on his head was unkempt, and he

had a filthy cloak wrapped around his shoulders. Maomao took him to be in his fifties. Something hung from his neck.

This one. He's the guy.

Maomao didn't know if they were going to find anyone else who was a better bet, so even though she had no idea who he was or what he was like, she would have to try her luck.

Just as the man was about to pass them by, Maomao stood up.

"Hey! You're..." the man said.

Maomao kept her mouth tight shut. The man pressed his curved blade against her neck.

Stay calm. Stay calm...

She felt like her blood had slowed down, but she opened her mouth. "*O Lord, do You see us?*" she said. The words Chue had taught her from the foreign scriptures. Maomao was careful to enunciate clearly, bent on not tripping over her own tongue.

Then she looked straight at the man. You could even call it a glare. Her pulse skyrocketed and she thought her knees might start shaking, but she couldn't let him see that. To sell this bluff, she would have to be as imperious as she possibly could.

There was a beat—but at length the man muttered, "Oh, c'mon" and let the sword drop. He sounded disappointed.

Does this mean my gamble paid off? Maomao felt like she might collapse on the spot, but she had to keep up the act.

"If they'd been nonbelievers, we could've just offed them!" the man grumbled.

That was close*!*

Much, much too close.

Maomao took another look at the necklace dangling around the man's neck. It was a simple thing, just a scrap of wood hanging from a leather strap. The piece of wood bore the same design Maomao had seen on the holy book she'd read to pass the time.

The same book whose teachings were propounded at the church in the town nearby.

Chapter 18: The Bandits' Hideout

The "town of faith" was remarkably quiet. There were shops packed in around the big religious building, but they were all closed. Instead, filthy men loitered in the streets. They didn't look like villagers by any stretch of the imagination; they were obviously bandits.

The middle-aged man, the one so full of faith that he had spared Maomao and Xiaohong, now led them along as prisoners. Other bandits sized them up as they went past, but quickly looked away again when the older man glared at them.

It was clear that the outlaws ran this town. These were not men of gainful employment or productive labor; they were feeding off this town, and when there was nothing left to feed on, they would move on to the next place.

Like locusts, Maomao thought, forcing down the bile that rose in her throat.

She was relieved to discover that, if nothing else, her judgment had been correct: the middle-aged man had been the right person to engage with. For one thing, he was a believer of the church here; for another, his status was at least somewhat secure.

She'd guessed at his faith from his necklace. As for his status, his outfit had given her an inkling. He wore a dirty cloak—hardly a valuable item, but from a bandit's perspective, valuable enough. The blade of his weapon had been carefully honed, and even his cloak was made with sturdy pelt—not something that was going to fall to tatters if he took a modest sword stroke.

In the rough-and-tumble world of bandits, physical prowess translated directly into authority. Maomao guessed that a man's accoutrements would convey his place in the gang's hierarchy.

Her efforts had earned her a bloody neck, courtesy of that finely honed blade. Not *too* bloody, so it quickly dried, but it had distressed Xiaohong, since it always looks like there's more blood than there is.

I'm lucky this kid is so docile, Maomao thought.

But Xiaohong had a habit of eating her own hair when she was anxious. Some people ate foreign objects when under stress; she probably had a variety of that condition.

"In here," the man said, leading them into the church at the center of town.

What did they call this faith again? Something something-ism?

She'd asked Chue the name of it, but it had been difficult to pronounce and Maomao didn't remember it very well.

A man about thirty years old reclined in the middle of the church's worship hall. It was a ballsy place to set yourself up. He was missing an eye from some kind of injury—and he looked like the kind of guy who *would* lose an eye in a fight. He was dressed like a member of one of the foreign tribes, with a fox pelt draped over a sleeveless shirt.

The bandits had proved terrible guests in this house of prayer. The man had set out several pelts to lie on, and the hall was littered with empty bottles and scraps of meat. Two terrified women waited nearby to do the man's bidding.

"I brought a couple more, boss," the middle-aged man said.

Their boss is...surprisingly young. Maomao had been expecting someone older. Observing the younger man's physique, though, she realized that maybe he had hauled himself to the top of the food chain through brute force.

"Them two?" the man asked.

"Yes, sir."

Who's he calling "them two"?

"Huh. I think we can do without the tagalong there."

There was a second before the older man said, "You said you would spare fellow believers. We could at least put her to work in the kitchen, don't you think?"

Tagalong? Spare me?

Maomao was starting to think that her assumptions about the situation had been a bit off. It almost sounded like they hadn't been after Maomao at all.

But if not me, then...

Her gaze turned to Xiaohong.

The boss heaved himself to his feet. He was built like a bear; he towered over Xiaohong, and tears leaped to the young girl's eyes as she hid behind Maomao.

"Hmmm... Hey!" the leader barked.

"Yes?" one of the women asked, flinching.

"Where's that wanted poster?"

Slowly, hesitantly, the woman handed him a piece of parchment. The boss unrolled it and looked from Xiaohong to the paper and back.

"It...kinda looks like her? I guess?"

They have a portrait?

The paper showed a child's face and included a written description of the subject's most distinctive characteristics. Maomao recognized the person in the picture. *Could that be...?*

It looked remarkably like the pampered young foreign woman Maomao had treated the other day.

All right, fair enough. She took another look at Xiaohong. The girl did indeed have light hair. From a distance, it wouldn't be hard to take her for a foreigner. Her eyes weren't blue, but you wouldn't notice that unless you were up close.

But they're hardly the same age!

Xiaohong was seven or eight years old at best. She couldn't have passed for ten if she'd tried, whereas the girl with the bad tooth must have been at least twelve or thirteen.

But then, foreigners tend to look older. Maybe she had actually been around ten.

No, I don't think so.

Foreigners didn't count their age the way people in Maomao's country did, where everyone got a year older on the first of the year. They counted from the day someone was actually born, so that a person turned "one year old" exactly one year after their birth. By that logic, someone might take Xiaohong for ten.

Maybe somebody spotted Gyokujun with us, and some info about him got mixed into the report?

Maomao took another look at the likeness, which was accompanied by a description.

Light golden hair, blue eyes, about ten years old...

Again, Xiaohong didn't have blue eyes, so one might think that would make it obvious she was a different person, but the boss hadn't noticed.

Maybe he can't read?

The poster listed one other notable feature: *May be disguised as a girl.*

Now Maomao understood why she and Xiaohong had been

captured.

"Ugh, forget it! It's s'posed to be a boy, ain't it? Well, one way to be sure. Strip 'er!"

The boss tried to grab Xiaohong's hand. Maomao stepped between them.

“Whazzis?” the hulking man said, annoyed.

Maomao swallowed hard and barely managed not to flinch back. Yes, she’d made the right call. This would have been a much, much more volatile situation with Gyokujun in tow.

“You needn’t trouble yourself,” she said. “This child is a girl. I’ll help her undress, so please, stay your hand.”

Maomao urged Xiaohong forward again. It should have been fairly obvious whether she was a boy or a girl.

“This will just take a second,” Maomao whispered to Xiaohong, who looked on the verge of tears. Then Maomao began to roll up her skirt. Once the boss saw she was a girl, he could be done with them.

It was at that moment that one of the women who had been attending the boss stepped forward. “M-Master One-Eyed Dragon... Please, let me check the child.”

“Mm,” he grunted. “All right. Whadda I want with some naked kid, anyway?”

One-Eyed Dragon—so that was what the boss here went by.

“One-Eyed Dragon”?

Awfully big name he had there, Maomao thought. The kind of sobriquet a great warrior would have had generations ago.

The woman came over to them and felt at Xiaohong’s skirt—weeping the whole while. “I’m sorry, sweetheart,” she said. Xiaohong didn’t say anything.

The woman was trying to spare this poor child as much embarrassment as she could. When she had confirmed that there was nothing “extra” between Xiaohong’s legs, she turned to One-Eyed Dragon with a look of relief. “She’s a girl,” the woman reported.

“Huh! Is she, now? Which jackass told me we should take a look at the next wagon coming through?”

“Our man on the inside in the next town.”

“All right. A hundred lashes, no food for three days.”

“Yes, sir.” The middle-aged man quietly went about his work.

“Ugh, dammit. Here I thought I could finally get Shikyou by the short hairs.” One-Eyed Dragon stamped on the ground like a child throwing a tantrum. He was so big, he made the floor shake.

Did he just say Shikyou?

Maomao stayed in front of Xiaohong, covering her. The girl was shaken to hear her uncle's name—and the last thing Maomao wanted was for One-Eyed Dragon to realize he was in possession of one of Shikyou's relatives.

No telling what he would do to her...

What Maomao had seen on that wanted poster made it clear that the foreign noblegirl—no, make that the foreign punk—with the bad tooth had caused some kind of quarrel. The kid had looked awfully sheltered—it turned out he was pretty important.

My fleeing must have been to spare Jinshi some kind of trouble. Whatever, that kid and his tooth were some kind of political key.

"What should we do with this pair?" the middle-aged man asked One-Eyed Dragon.

"Whatever ya want. I don't care."

One-Eyed Dragon had lost all interest in them—or maybe he was pouting. Whichever, he curled up on his pelt "bed" like a bear or a tiger settling in for a nap.

"You," the middle-aged man snapped at the woman who had apologized to Xiaohong. "You take them. They're fellow believers."

"Yes, sir." The woman bowed. Of One-Eyed Dragon she was afraid, but for this man she seemed to have something approaching respect.

"This way," she said to Maomao and Xiaohong, and they had little choice but to follow her.

Chapter 19: The Bandit Village (Part One)

Maomao and Xiaohong were led to a room full of women and children. The bedrolls and pillows that lined the walls indicated that they all slept here together. A brawny man stood guard outside.

So that's the situation. The citizens of this town were under the outlaws' collective thumb, and they were keeping the women and children as what amounted to hostages. That apology earlier—*"I'm sorry, sweetheart"*—had that been for getting Xiaohong involved? But then, the townspeople were equally victims. Maomao didn't yet know for certain what the words meant.

Their guide brought them to a plump middle-aged woman who said, "Newcomers? Hmm." She looked Maomao and Xiaohong up and down. "Beanstalks, both of them. Think we can use them? The *laoshi* brought them, didn't he?"

"Yes. They're fellow believers," the other woman replied.

That older guy, he's the laoshi?

He was probably a pastor, or at least someone connected with the church. Which would mean he wasn't one of the outlaws, but a resident of this town.

In other words, the people here are cooperating with the bandits—or they're being forced to.

That would explain the woman's apology. Then again, Maomao should really have known sooner—what kind of bandits carried farm implements?

The pudgy woman looked at Maomao. "Sorry, kid, but I need you to take off everything you're wearing. It's all women in this room, anyway. Strip down and then get changed."

"Yes, ma'am," Maomao replied. It didn't really bother her. She just started taking off her clothes. The room was, like the lady said, all women; and anyway, she was used to this from the routine body searches every time she entered the rear palace.

There was just one teensy little problem.

"What's this, eh?"

"That's a coagulant, ma'am."

"And this?"

"An antipyretic."

"And what in the world is this?"

"It treats coughs."

The middle-aged woman was getting more and more inpatient with the mountain of herbal medicine packets that was emerging from the folds of Maomao's robes.

"What's this one?" she demanded.

"That's...an energy tonic," Maomao replied.

The item in question was the bottle that the biaoshi had given her.

It's not not *an energy tonic*, Maomao told herself. Snake venom would certainly spice up your alcohol.

"Just who are you?" the middle-aged woman asked.

"A medicine woman," Maomao replied. It was the honest truth; no point trying to hide it now. Her makeup was among the items that had come tumbling out, so she would have to judge how far she could push her story about being Xiaohong's mother.

"A medicine woman, huh? And this is your medicine? Keep it close, then. Better than letting that lot get a hold of it—they'd just throw it away. No idea what to do with it, I'm sure."

The woman had appeared cold, but deep down, it seemed she wasn't a bad person. Of course, that might simply be because she believed Maomao shared her faith.

I'm not exactly a nonbeliever in the strict sense, but it would be better if they kept thinking I believe like they do.

"Change into something else; we'll wash your clothes for you. Are you able to do the washing?"

"Yes, ma'am. Also, if you'll forgive my asking, I don't suppose we could get the cargo from the wagon we were riding on, could we?"

"Sadly, no. Was there something important in there?"

"Not as such, but my well-loved copy of the scriptures was in that wagon. I was in the middle of teaching the girl."

Xiaohong took that as her cue to cling tightly to Maomao.

She's a fine little actor, Maomao thought. Maybe she was being hopeful, but she thought Xiaohong might just be able to help her

pull this off.

To Maomao's relief, the other woman was sucked right in. "The scriptures? Well, that won't do. I'll ask the teacher to help."

The clothes they were given were rough, but of sturdy weave. The cotton outfits they'd been wearing would have stood out too much in town. Besides, cotton was all well and good for a housewife traveling with a biaoshi, but for a couple of almost-prisoners, the rough-hewn textiles better looked the part.

"All right, I've got things to do. See those girls over there about how you can help," the middle-aged woman said.

"Understood, ma'am," Maomao said, bowing politely.

"Now, you listen," the woman added. "If you don't pull your weight around here, they'll get rid of you without a second thought. If you want to survive, forget your cozy domestic life and work like you've never worked before. Treat nothing as beneath you."

Maomao and Xiaohong both nodded energetically.

"Say, what were your names, again?" the woman asked.

"Oh, uh, names?" Maomao said, panicking. Was it safe to tell this woman their real names? One-Eyed Dragon obviously had it out for Shikyou, and if he realized Xiaohong was his niece—well, the thought frightened Maomao. But by the same token, if Jinshi was on Maomao's trail, she couldn't have him pass her up because he didn't know she was there.

Hrm...

After a moment's consideration, she came up with:

"I'm Xiongxiong, and this is Xiaolan." The names meant "bear-bear" and "little wolf" respectively, but they were the best she could do on such short notice. She shot a look at Xiaohong, whose brow was furrowed as if she were looking at a caterpillar.

"Xiongxiong and Xiaolan? Really? Aren't those names rather...mannish?" a woman asked in a friendly tone. She was the other woman who had been serving One-Eyed Dragon when Maomao had met him earlier. Her sunbaked skin made her look older than she was, but she said she was seventeen. She already had three children, which at least confirmed that there was nothing incongruous about Maomao and Xiaohong posing as mother and child.

"Yes, they are. Women in my family are given strong names to make them resilient against sickness," Maomao said. She found the lie as easy as breathing; she could even keep peeling vegetables

while she said it. (The other woman had decided that her physique didn't lend itself to physical labor and had put her to work in the kitchen instead.)

Maomao peeled the vegetables and Xiaohong washed them. If this town had one thing going for it, it was that it was close to a water source, giving them the luxury of using more water than most places.

At the moment, Maomao was peeling an ordinary white potato. She had seen enough of those to last her a lifetime.

"We may not have our freedom, but try to stay strong. At least it's better than being killed," said the other woman, who proved to be quite a talker. As they worked on the vegetables, she filled them in on the town's story. The place used to be bustling, but as soon as the swarm hit, people stopped visiting almost completely. Townsfolk with nowhere to turn joined the bandits, who thereby extended their power. Worse, that no-account "boss" had shown up about a month before and taken over the town. The western capital had sent some soldiers to deal with the situation, but they had been massacred. No wonder the western capital hadn't had any reports.

It's been a month?

The situation was worse than they had thought.

"Our strongest villagers tried to fight back, but the bandits killed them all. That clown calling himself One-Eyed Dragon might not be very bright, but he's got the muscles to make up for it. The laoshi was the one who suggested we should go along with him... He said there was no chance we could stand against One-Eyed Dragon ourselves."

The laoshi—that would be the man of faith who had captured Maomao and Xiaohong. His suggestion was what had brought them to the present moment.

This can't go on for long.

Did their "laoshi" understand that? With no way to break out of this situation, maybe he was just hoping to live a little longer.

Maomao was still wondering about it as she tossed the peeled potato into a bucket. "Where should we throw away the peels?"

"We don't. We stir-fry them and use them as feed for the last of the unbelievers," the other woman told her with a look of disgust.

"I can't say the peels taste very good. They make your tongue tingle," said Maomao, who had sampled them several times herself since hearing that the skin and buds of a potato were poisonous.

“Yes, well, it’s all those bandits will let us do. We try to make it taste a little better with this.” The woman showed Maomao a jar filled with a mix of spices.

“You barely afford them potatoes, but you give them lots of spices?”

It went beyond salt and pepper—the blend included cinnamon, nutmeg, and saffron, among other things. Those spices all had medicinal properties as well, so Maomao’s eyes were shining.

“We don’t have anything else to do with them,” the woman replied. “So the men attacked a caravan and brought these to us—great. We have no way to sell them, so they told us to use them however we wanted.”

“What a waste.”

“Ah, but it has its benefits. A bit of spice can do a lot to cover for crummy ingredients. For example, say we were to occasionally slip some rotten vegetables into the bandits’ meals...” The woman was positively grinning. “I’m just so glad you turned out to be fellow believers, Xiongxiong. If you’d been unbelievers, oh, you would have been in for a hard time!”

“How do you mean?” Maomao asked, trying to look as calm as she could.

“One-Eyed Dragon wanted to cut the number of villagers in half. The laoshi begged him not to, promised he would get us all to work for him. But...” Tears sprang to the woman’s eyes. “One-Eyed Dragon said, ‘Then we’ll cut ’em down to half of half!’ And... And he made the laoshi choose.”

This laoshi had summoned the nonbelievers to be purged.

“Th-There were little children there! Playmates of my own little one. Everyone who couldn’t possibly be used to do physical labor was...”

She broke off into a sob.

Maomao glanced around, afraid that the man guarding them would think they weren’t working. “I understand. I’m sorry for bringing up such painful memories.”

Maomao rubbed the woman’s back and gritted her teeth, wishing there was something she could do about this terrible One-Eyed Dragon.

After a few days, Maomao had begun to get the lay of the land. The women vented their emotions by talking, which meant there

was plenty for a newcomer like Maomao to hear.

The boss might call himself One-Eyed Dragon, but he looked more like a bear, the women said. They went on about how he had muscles for brains and his feet stank—the sort of thing, Maomao reflected, they could all be killed for saying if anyone overheard them.

While One-Eyed Dragon might not have been very bright, he had a sharp intuition and held the outlaws together through his own strength.

"The rest of them are all small fry. If he weren't here..."

A woman was making rice and talking to Maomao, who was peeling potatoes for all she was worth. The peels were going to be eaten, so she tried to at least get the eyes off.

The room Maomao and Xiaohong had been dumped in was home to some thirty women and children. They were divided up by job: most of the people in this room worked in the kitchen, while others did the laundry or cleaning. The village had once been home to a thousand people or so, but in the wake of the insect swarm about half of them had left for other areas. Most of those were merchants, while the ones who remained behind largely comprised farmers, those with nowhere else to go, and true believers defending their church.

It doesn't seem like there are actually that many bandits.

Maybe fifty, give or take. But that was more than enough to attack a village of noncombatants. Once the outlaws had dealt with the soldiers sent from the western capital, it was all clerics and farmers here.

Farmers usually have good builds; physically they're strong. But they didn't know how to fight. Lahan's Brother was an excellent case in point.

Considering that the village's new oppressors had resorted to putting the men to bandit-like tasks, One-Eyed Dragon's followers probably weren't much of a force to be reckoned with. A rabble, really.

"You know," Maomao said, not sure whether she should voice her next question but asking it anyway, "One-Eyed Dragon was going on about someone called Shikyou. Who's that?"

"Oh, him? He's apparently the man who put out that bear's eye years back. That brute brought it on himself by attacking the caravan this Shikyou was protecting, but 'the boss' blames him just

the same!"

Stupid oldest son! Maomao thought. Okay, it wasn't actually Shikyou's fault, but he was still the reason that Maomao was in this fix. Of course, one could argue that Maomao had been dragged into this when *Xiaohong* had come to get her...

Dammit, she's too cute to blame.

Maomao discovered she had caught some sympathy for the girl. She'd spent so much time around whiny, obnoxious brats that she couldn't help being smitten by a kid who actually listened and did as she was told. She could almost believe that she might actually like children, if all the kids in the world were like that.

I guess Princess Lingli was cute too. But that was work.

She suddenly found herself remembering the Jade Pavilion. She wondered if all its residents were doing well.

Seriously, though, if she'd known she was going to end up like this, then she would have been better off just ignoring Xiaohong. And to think, it was Hulan who'd put her up to it!

I knew I didn't like that guy.

He'd probably been trying to entrap Shikyou.

Pisses me off.

Maomao shook her fist. She didn't even put down the potato first.

As her mind went around in circles, she finished peeling the potatoes. She put the peels and the vegetables on a cutting board. The potatoes would be steamed for the main course, while the peels would be finely chopped and stir-fried.

Maomao picked up a potato peel and scowled at it.

We need better stuff.

From what Maomao heard, despite the talk of purging a quarter of the town's population, they hadn't actually all been killed. Those who were able were put to work. They were treated as little better than slaves, so the food they got was indeed poor. Just stir-fried potato skins with a dash of seasoning. Meanwhile, the bandits got precious sheep's meat and butter.

The woman in charge of the cooking wasn't happy about that, but there wasn't much she could do. She did what she could by frying the potato peels after the meat so that they absorbed some of the flavor.

Maomao gathered that it had never been the way of this village to discriminate against people just for believing in a different faith,

and the laoshi's decision had prompted some dissension and resentment.

Maomao heard one person remark, "It's awful, abandoning little children just because they don't believe what we do."

"I agree," someone else said. "The laoshi's not the man I thought he was. Just look how he's cozied up to that big bear!"

At the same time, others took a different view.

"We could have ended up dead ourselves."

"He had to make some kind of choice. They forced him!"

"Still," the woman said as she put the potatoes in the pot, "we owe the unbelievers a lot. Even these potatoes were brought to us by a nice man who didn't share our beliefs."

A nice man, different religion? Maomao thought. Just one face floated into her mind. *Lahan's Brother!*

This must have been one of the villages he'd visited when he was out teaching farming methods. Since they'd adopted potatoes as their staple food, it was fair to say he'd been successful.

"He only stayed for a few days, but he was such a hard worker! If I were ten years younger, ooh, I'd have proposed to him like *that*!" said another of the aunties.

"Yes, well, ten years ago you were still already married, weren't you? He would have been perfect for *my* daughter, though. If he'd just stayed a few more days, I would have told her to sneak into his room one night!"

"Ah, yes, my neighbor said the same thing. Rumor had it that he looked like a farmer, but he actually came from some famous family!"

"Oh, stop with your jokes! You saw how he wielded that hoe. No pampered aristocrat could do that. That man comes from a line of farmers, make no mistake!"

Uh... He technically *comes from a military family*, Maomao thought, but she listened quietly.

"I know what you mean. *Oh*, how he handled that hoe!"

Look at you, "Brother"! The ladies love you.

She wondered what Lahan's Brother would think if he could hear what she was hearing. If she got out of this alive, maybe she would bring him back here to meet some nice girls. He might make someone here a very good son-in-law.

Finally she ventured, "Excuse me..."

"Yes, Xiongxiong? What is it?"

Maomao couldn't quite get used to that name, even though she had picked it herself. She wished she'd gone with something else, but nothing had come to mind, so she was stuck with Xiongxiong. Even the normally impassive Xiaohong seemed to think it was a dumb name.

"Did a female biaoshi happen to come through here just before we arrived? We'd hired her as our bodyguard..."

She'd been wondering all this time.

"Hmm," one of the women said as she tasted the food. "I don't remember any fuss over anything like that. But then, I've been in the kitchen this whole time. I don't always know much about what goes on outside."

"I'm not sure either," said another woman. "When they come across a nonbeliever, though, a lot of the time they throw them in jail and figure out what to do with them later."

"Jail?" Maomao asked. She had trouble believing the biaoshi would get herself caught so easily, but then again, she couldn't have predicted this situation. Maybe she had run, leaving Maomao and the others behind.

Maomao groaned and set about chopping potato peels.

"I finished washing these," said Xiaohong, arriving with the potatoes.

"You're such a good worker for such a little girl," one of the women said, patting Xiaohong's head with a leathery palm. Xiaohong smiled shyly.

"We're so glad you're the hardworking kind, both of you. If you hadn't been any use in the kitchen, you would have been left to do some other kind of work."

"Is that worse than what goes on here?" Maomao asked.

"Cleaning and laundry are such physical labor, and being sent to the fields isn't any better. There's no easy work, but at least kitchen service is mostly worry-free. There's just one thing you have to be careful of."

"Wh-What might that be?"

The woman pressed right up into Maomao's face. "We take turns waiting on that big bear, two at a time. When it's your turn, don't try anything funny. One girl took a knife with her and tried to kill him when he wasn't looking. But she..."

The woman didn't finish her sentence, but her dark expression said it all. The girl in question had not succeeded.

What about poison, then? Maomao thought.

"He never touches his food or drink without making the girls try them first. To make sure they're not poisoned."

Bah.

Maomao took the pot, still slick with the juices from the meat, and tossed in the chopped potato peels.

Chapter 20: The Bandit Village (Part Two)

“Xiongxiong, come here. You said you’re a medicine woman, didn’t you?” said the middle-aged woman who oversaw the kitchen staff. She looked troubled. “Could you come with me for a moment?”

“Certainly, ma’am.”

Maomao followed her to the edge of town, where they found a man lying on some dry grass. His breathing was harsh and irregular, and one leg was bent in an unnatural direction. Half his face was swollen from a beating and blood dribbled from his mouth. Broken teeth, Maomao suspected. He was also covered in cuts. She took him to be not even twenty years old—still a boy.

Maomao was already moving even as she asked, “What in the world happened here?”

She elevated the broken leg so it was higher than the young man’s heart. Firewood for cooking lay nearby; she grabbed a piece and improvised a splint to brace the limb. At least the break was a clean one. If the bone had been shattered, she would have had to cut the leg open to extract the shards.

“He earned One-Eyed Dragon’s ‘special attention,’” the woman said.

“That’s some attention.”

If there was a “lesson” here, it looked like it had gone too far. From the anxiety in the woman’s eyes, Maomao guessed that the battered boy was one of the townspeople.

“When he gets tired lying around and gorging himself, he picks someone to beat up. He calls it ‘training.’ This isn’t the worst we’ve seen—sometimes he kills people.” The auntie had a far-off look in her eyes.

“Kills people? That doesn’t sound like what most of us would call training.”

“I heard this young man actually landed a blow. It wasn’t much,

hardly more than a scratch, but that bear was so shocked that he bit the inside of his mouth—which was his excuse to beat this young man to a pulp."

Trying to see if any broken teeth were left behind, Maomao looked into the bloody mess of the boy's mouth, then inserted a wadded-up rag. She wanted him to bite down on it, since the pressure could help stop the bleeding, but she wasn't sure he was conscious.

"Can you bite down?" she asked. The boy didn't say anything, but nodded feebly.

In an effort to stop the bleeding, she ended up using up all of her precious supply of *puhuang*.

She removed the young man's shirt and checked him over; thankfully, nothing else seemed to be broken. Any injuries could have caused life-threatening damage to his internal organs.

"This is all I can do with what I have on hand," she told the other woman. "What he needs now is nutritious food and some rest."

"He won't be getting those," the woman said unhappily. "Anyone who can't work is thrown in with the nonbelievers. The best he can hope for is thin soup and potato skins. People there frequently have upset stomachs. Maybe it's because they're so undernourished."

Maomao suspected it had more to do with the potato peels and sprouts—she'd tried to remove the eyes when she was peeling the potatoes, but even then, some of the poison could remain.

Maybe I should say something, she thought, but the only outcome of voicing her concerns would be that the nonbelievers wouldn't have any food at all.

"In any case, thank you," the woman said. "I'll get the men to carry this youngster away. You can go back."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Oh, but first..." She gestured to Maomao to come closer.

She went, curious about what the woman wanted: it turned out to be the clothing Maomao and Xiaohong had been wearing when they arrived. Maomao had never dreamed they would ever see it again.

"I patched the torn spots. I suggest you hide these somewhere—if anyone sees them, they'll snatch them for themselves, you can count on that."

“Thank you very much.” Maomao bowed her head and studied the clothing.

I don’t remember anything that needed patching.

Maybe their clothes had gotten caught on something as they had run through the forest? Her inspection yielded traces of stitching on the sleeves, and she caught her breath. The woman had done much more than patching; she’d added elaborate embroidery in the shape of a bird. On the inside of the sleeves, where you would never find it if you weren’t looking for it, there was a delicately embroidered sparrow.

Could this mean...

The embroidery turned out to be delicate letters masquerading as an elaborate pattern. They were in a foreign language, and Maomao could only just manage to read them.

Dinner...service...create...opening.

She doubted this sequence of words was pure coincidence. She looked up at the middle-aged woman, who had already turned away.

Come to think of it...

“If you want to survive, forget your cozy domestic life.”

At the time the woman had spoken those words, Maomao hadn’t actually told her that she and Xiaohong were a mother and child. Yet the woman had known.

So that’s what’s going on, Maomao thought. Somehow, she was sure of it.

The kitchen staff’s work was done after they had cleaned the dinner dishes. That didn’t require that many hands, so people were assigned to the work on a rotating schedule. Maomao and Xiaohong, as “mother and daughter,” were typically given dishwashing duty together. They worked silently in the light of the moon.

Maomao wasn’t the type to start conversations, for the most part, and Xiaohong was the same, so when they were together, they didn’t talk much. Tonight, however, Maomao spoke up. “I’d like to ask you to do something.” She whispered even though there was no one else around.

“What is it?” Xiaohong was a clever girl; she already seemed to know what Maomao had in mind.

Chapter 21: Serving Dinner

Maomao was preparing potatoes again.

"What is this new dish you're proposing?" the middle-aged woman was asking.

The bandits had complained about the meager quantities of food, so the women had been trying to think of ways to quiet the grumbling when Maomao had raised her hand.

"We cut up steamed potatoes," she said.

"Peels and all?"

"Peels and all."

Using the huge pot, they fried meat in oil, then added the quartered potatoes and flavored everything with wine and soy paste. Plenty of spices too. And although they didn't have much to spare, they even added some honey to make the whole thing glisten.

Wow!

The smell alone was enough to make the mouth water. The flavor would be perfect to entice the diners to drink some more wine.

"It certainly seems like it will be popular," said a woman holding a potato.

"Mm... I'm only sorry it has to go to that bunch of louts," said another.

"Don't say that, auntie! If they caught you, they'd beat you to death!"

"Don't you think I know that? Sigh! Why, oh why must we constantly give them our best food?"

Maomao would have loved to sample the dish herself, but meat was monitored closely here: hardly anyone except One-Eyed Dragon and his men got any. The rest of them might get the scraps in their soup if they were lucky, or maybe whatever was left on the bandits' proverbial table.

"All right, I'm going to make more of this," Maomao said.

"Yes, thank you. We'll have to steam some more potatoes," one

of the aunties said.

"Oh, I've got that covered," Maomao replied. That was when Xiaohong appeared with a basket full of midsize potatoes. "We can use lots of smaller potatoes to make them easier to steam. After they're steamed, it won't be so hard to chop them."

Maomao plopped the potatoes into a steamer. They had to keep cracking or they wouldn't be in time for dinner.

"Listen," said one of the women as Maomao was frying some more meat. "I know the two of you are going to serve One-Eyed Dragon tonight. Will you be all right?" She looked at Maomao and Xiaohong. Serving duty came to everyone on the kitchen staff equally, regardless of age. "That bear usually contents himself with widows and the nonbelievers, but once in a while he makes a move on the poor ladies serving his dinner. You... Your husband is still alive, isn't he?"

She was worried what might happen to Maomao if the outlaw took her. Presumably there was a chance that, from a religious perspective, such an incident would be considered adultery.

"I'll watch myself," Maomao said, concentrating on her frying. She didn't think there could be *that* many freaks in the world who would go for someone like her, but it couldn't hurt to be careful.

They took the bandits' dinner to the church. Everyone ate breakfast whenever they felt like it, but dinner was taken in the church, as a group, and doubled as a chance for everyone to report in.

Maomao had estimated there must be about fifty bandits in the town, but it looked like it might be closer to thirty. A surprisingly small number.

She and Xiaohong sat beside One-Eyed Dragon. Dinner tonight was Maomao's potatoes-and-meat creation along with butter, bread, and a lamb-and-vegetable stew, which included goat's milk to give it some body. As for the alcohol, it was a fermented horse milk and gave off a very unique smell. One-Eyed Dragon also got something extra: a patty made of vinegared horse meat, ground and worked with pepper and aromatic herbs.

"All right, eat up!" One-Eyed Dragon said, and his gang commenced doing exactly that. The meat and potatoes dish got rave reviews and was quickly consumed, although a few people who didn't like it reached for one of the other offerings.

Oh, don't be picky, just eat the damn stuff! Maomao thought, but her thoughts were never going to reach these selfish, self-interested marauders.

"You eat too." One-Eyed Dragon piled potatoes, bread, butter, raw horse meat, and plenty of stew onto Maomao's and Xiaohong's plates, shoveling it on as if he were feeding livestock.

"Gladly, sir." Maomao picked up a potato with her bare hands; she couldn't even use chopsticks. The meat was messy but delicious. It ought to be—Maomao was the one who had prepared it, and she'd made sure to mix in copious amounts of spices.

One-Eyed Dragon watched her eat intently. He might look like he was generously giving her food, but really he wanted to see if it was poisoned. When Maomao finished the food and still looked hale and hearty, he patted the jar of alcohol.

Maomao poured some of the horse-milk brew and was about to drink it when the bandit leader growled, "Not you. Give it to her." He held the cup toward Xiaohong.

The girl quailed, but Maomao looked at her and nodded. Xiaohong nodded back.

"Thank you, sir," she said. Then she took the cup and drained the contents. "Ahh!" She burped. The flavor must have been more agreeable than one might expect. Horse-milk wine was fermented, yes, but the alcohol content wasn't very high; Maomao had heard that in I-sei Province, even babies drank it, and it seemed that was true.

"I'll try some as well. Just for form's sake," Maomao said, and then she poured herself a cup and drank.

It really is light on the alcohol.

Frankly, she could have done with something a bit drier.

One-Eyed Dragon must have finally been convinced that everything was safe, because he set to eating and drinking. Maomao kept the alcohol flowing, making sure his cup was never empty. The meal felt less like dinner and more like a drunken banquet, and proceeded slowly. The men conducted themselves with abandon, spilling their drinks, throwing bread at each other, and on and on.

Here we're trying to save every scrap of food. Maomao looked at the meat and potatoes littering the floor and thought about what a waste it was, but she wasn't going to stoop to eating off the ground. These "leftovers" would go to making the meal for the locals.

In the midst of the revelry, someone stood up from his seat.

“Gotta take a dump.” Then he left the church.

Maomao picked up the empty alcohol bottle. “I’ll bring another,” she said.

She called Xiaohong over and was about to step out when One-Eyed Dragon stopped her. “Hold it right there. It don’t take two of you to get a bottle, do it?”

Maomao paused. “Of course not, sir.”

She gave the bottle to Xiaohong and busied herself putting more food on One-Eyed Dragon’s empty plate instead. Most of the meatless dishes hadn’t been touched. She’d observed that One-Eyed Dragon always chewed on the right side of his mouth, while the left side seemed to have an ulcer.

Maybe the bottle was too heavy for Xiaohong, because she tripped and fell. There was a crash as the bottle shattered.

“I’m so sorry! I’ll clean it up right away!” she said.

One-Eyed Dragon had been doing nothing but drinking since he’d finished his horse meat. Meanwhile, the men started leaving their seats one by one.

“I gotta use the toilet.”

“Uh, me too!”

One-Eyed Dragon raised an eyebrow.

Almost there. A little more...

Another man stood up, then covered his mouth. His pallor didn’t look very good. He stumbled along a few steps, leaning on the wall for support, and finally crumpled to his knees.

“Hrrrghhh!”

He spewed sick everywhere. The bandits nearby scuttled away from him, but none of them looked much better than he did. Finally they looked at the food they’d been consuming so greedily moments before. If it had happened to just one of them, it might have been a case of an unlucky drunk, but the sickness took another, and then another.

Maomao discovered she was the subject of a very intense glare.

“You put somethin’ in this!” One-Eyed Dragon said.

“It could be food poisoning. We didn’t have many fresh ingredients to work with,” Maomao said, trying to make it look like she believed this was an act of God.

Unfortunately, that didn’t work on One-Eyed Dragon. She could almost see steam coming out of his ears. She lost no time hiding behind the altar.

“You bitch!” One-Eyed Dragon howled and lunged to his feet—only to come crashing back down. His hands were shaking. “You put somethin’ in my food!”

“We both checked the food for poison.”

Of course we put something in it.

Now, why was Maomao feeling fine while the bandits were sick as a pack of dogs?

Simply put, it was a matter of quantity consumed. Maomao hadn’t eaten enough of the stuff in her tasting to make herself sick.

The sprouts and peels of the potatoes were toxic, with the potential to cause vomiting and diarrhea. She’d had time to kill in the western capital, so she’d conducted some experiments, testing to see how much it took to give herself a stomachache. Much to the exasperation of those around her, of course.

Potato toxins caused tingling. Normally, the bandits would have noticed, but if it was true that the food supply was limited and occasionally included rotten ingredients, they would have grown inured to such sensations. Just to make sure, Maomao had been including potato sprouts in their meals for the past several days.

The sprouts were the most toxic part of the potato, but green peels were fairly potent too. Green indicated that the potato wasn’t ripe yet, and leaving it out in the sun only made the peels greener.

That was the first thing Maomao had asked Xiaohong to do: collect small potatoes and put them where they would get plenty of sun.

She had of course anticipated that some of the bandits would eat the potatoes and some wouldn’t. The people with two taste buds to rub together had preferred other dishes, but Maomao had put something special in those too. Namely, ground nutmeg. They had so much of the stuff that she could have started up a small business with it, so supply wasn’t an issue.

Nutmeg could be used for its medicinal properties, but by the same token, too much of it was toxic. It could induce nausea, cramps, and palpitations, as well as severe confusion.

And Maomao had included plenty of it in the meat patty she’d made especially for One-Eyed Dragon.

“You filthy little—!” One-Eyed Dragon shook and shivered, but still bared his teeth. He clutched his favored weapon, an axe. Maomao kept moving in an effort to keep herself from being swallowed up by fear. One-Eyed Dragon tried and failed to follow

her; he took a few swings with his axe but kept dropping it.

When Xiaohong tripped, Maomao had rubbed oil on the axe's handle under the guise of cleaning it. If One-Eyed Dragon had been smart, he would have had a cloth or something wrapped around the haft, but it was just plain wood, and very slippery.

"Wh-What's goin' on? I didn't even...eat...that much..."

Ah, but you drank plenty.

Over the past few days' meals, Maomao had learned that One-Eyed Dragon was a picky eater with a taste for meat and drink. She knew he was unlikely to touch the potatoes, and that he was big enough that the nutmeg wasn't likely to affect him on its own.

So Maomao had tampered with the alcohol too.

"Th-The drink. It's gotta be. But wait...the kid... She drank it too, no problem..."

Maomao and Xiaohong were both in perfect health.

I'm glad it had the intended effect.

In the alcohol, Maomao had put the snake venom the lady biaoshi had given her. How was it that she and Xiaohong had escaped its effects unscathed?

He chose the perfect time to have an injured mouth.

Maomao had remembered what the woman had said, that One-Eyed Dragon had bitten the inside of his mouth, and taken it out on the unfortunate villager.

Snake venom was a stamina tonic. If you took it by mouth, it would be dissolved in your gastric juices. Maomao had anticipated the possibility that Xiaohong might be told to try the drink, which was why she'd served the horse-milk alcohol instead of something stronger. She'd checked the inside of Xiaohong's mouth thoroughly before putting this plan in motion, making sure that she had no sores or bad teeth. This was the second thing she'd requested of the girl.

If the inside of one's mouth was injured, it was a different story. The wound provided a point of entry for the toxin, which wouldn't be neutralized but could travel throughout the body. Meanwhile, the unique flavor of the horse-milk alcohol hid the taste of the venom.

"You'll pay for this..." Swaying, One-Eyed Dragon raised a hand. "Get her! Catch the...the woman!" he ordered. He could barely get his tongue around the words, but he still had it in him to tell his men what to do.

Those bandits who still had the wherewithal approached Maomao. Not all of them had eaten her poisoned food, of course, while variations in body type meant even those who had were each affected differently.

Maomao, however, had planned for a worse situation than this.

I just want a fighting chance.

She had to buy time, somehow. Run, somehow. Then this might work out.

Maomao darted between the pillars, overturning a jar of oil as she went. The bandits, already barely keeping their feet, slipped and fell. It looked like something out of a comedy routine, but for Maomao, it was a matter of life and death.

As she ran, she managed to give the church bell a great ring. That should make it clear that this was an emergency.

Do it! Do it now!

More and more of One-Eyed Dragon's men joined the chase, and Maomao found herself cornered.

They're gonna get me! In desperation, she grabbed a nearby plate and flung it at her pursuers.

It was at just that moment that the church door flew open with a bang.

"Wh-Who the hell is that?" One-Eyed Dragon demanded, turning unsteadily toward the door. Could he tell who was there?

Took your damn time about it! Maomao thought at the man who stood there with his companions.

"Long time no see, bear-man," the newcomer said.

"I know... I know that voice!" One-Eyed Dragon leaned against a pillar. Who did he see with his one remaining eye?

"Looks like you've been living it up out here. If I'd known you would sink this low, I'd have taken both your eyes."

The man making this unsettling pronouncement had a face that looked noble, yet wild.

"Shikyou, you son of a bitch!"

It was Shikyou, accompanied by a group of biaoshi—and Maomao could see her lady escort among them.

"All right, let's clean up, shall we?!" Shikyou shouted. The biaoshi raised their hands in a cheer of agreement.

Seriously, could they have left it any later?!

Maomao heaved a great sigh and slumped to the floor.

Chapter 22: How Things Turned Out

The cleanup of the bandits was almost comically quick. The ones using the toilet found themselves hog-tied, while those in the church put up token resistance, but were subdued and arrested with almost no bloodshed.

Still, with so many of the bandits suffering from vomiting and diarrhea, the place was hellish in a whole new way, and we'll refrain from describing it in too much detail. Maomao did *not* want to be the one who had to clean up.

She did, however, find herself face-to-face with Shikyou and frowning intensely. The lady biaoshi was to one side of her, while Xiaohong, overjoyed to be reunited with her uncle, was on the other. They had borrowed one of the assembly rooms; guards were posted outside to discourage any eavesdropping.

"I think it's about time you explained what's going on," Maomao said, showing no sign of intimidation despite being faced with a man who weighed at least twice as much as she did.

The lady biaoshi left the room with Xiaohong, perhaps a sign of consideration.

"Believe me, I'd love to, but maybe we should start by reintroducing ourselves. How much do you know about me? Don't hold back; tell me everything."

Maomao decided to take him at his word. "You're Master Gyokuen's grandson and Master Gyoku-ou's oldest son. Nephew of Empress Gyokuyou. In a word, your bloodline is perfectly respectable, but your behavior is anything but. You're a black sheep who's not much favored in the current succession dispute. You once sold fake bottles of very exclusive wine, and some people claim you have ties to bandit groups. While I'm at it, I think you should do a better job raising your own son. If you're going to just let him grow up like that, maybe you should have another kid."

"Well, I did say not to hold back." Shikyou didn't look offended by Maomao's words. "Thanks to you, Gyokujun returned safely, although he was pretty traumatized from being chased hither and

yon by bandits."

He continued: "All right, my turn. You're Grand Commandant Kan's daughter. Publicly, you're here as a court lady serving as an assistant to the medical office, but in reality you're a favorite of the Moon Prince, is that right?"

"Because I was born to a courtesan with whom Grand Commandant Kan was close, he's mistaken me for his daughter, that's all. As to the Moon Prince, I can tell you only that he values me for my ability to check food for poison."

You had to make sure to nip these misunderstandings in the bud.

"Mm, very well. We'll pretend that's true."

Maomao wasn't sure she liked the way Shikyou said that, but she chose to ignore it. Otherwise they would never get anywhere.

"Now, how did things end up like this? Where should I even start?" Shikyou grunted and drummed his fingers on the table. "I know I have a reputation as some kind of gang leader, but...well, maybe you'd understand if I said I set up a biaoshi agency? Or more properly, I purchased a small agency and succeeded to its leadership."

"What about the bandit connections?"

"How could I be on good terms with pirates? That bear has had it out for me ever since I took his eye. Once I set up shop as a biaoshi, he started making a nuisance of himself in my territory. Sometimes he'd even claim to be with my agency! So I've had to labor under these ridiculous rumors that we were somehow in league with each other."

Maomao was leery of taking Shikyou's story completely at face value, but it more or less lined up with what Chue had told her.

Actually, it's Chue's information that's suspicious.

If Maomao accepted exactly what Chue said, there was a contradiction. For that matter, Chue talked about Shikyou as if he were some kind of lazy outcast, but then she had helped Maomao to escape with this very man.

Knowing "Miss Chue," I wouldn't put it past her to have used some expertly massaged truth to lead me along. Was she trying to keep me from getting involved with the "rogue," Shikyou?

If so, Maomao would have to listen to Shikyou's story and compare the facts as she heard them.

She decided to cut right to the chase. "Why was someone after

your life? And why did it mean that I had to leave the western capital?"

"That's a very long story."

"I expect as much."

Maomao didn't care how long the story was; she just wanted him to hurry up and tell it.

"It started like this: not long after the Moon Prince arrived here, I was asked to accompany a caravan to the western capital. Another biaoshi would see it on the first leg of its journey, but once they left that agent's territory, I would be in charge."

"Did you accept the job knowing that the caravan originated in a foreign country?"

"Well, I had a good guess. And I suspect they asked for me because they knew who I was. I'm sure they assumed that even if Gyoku-ou found out what they were up to, his son would be able to smooth things over. The biaoshi were well aware of his xenophobia, you see."

"And what about you, his son? Did you share it?"

Empress Gyokuyou had been tormented in her youth by Gyoku-ou's children. Did that make this man just as xenophobic as his father?

Shikyou took a moment to answer. "Yes...I used to. Taking my cues from my father, I hated 'outlanders' as much as he did. I realized, though, that in a country that shared so many borders with other lands, excluding foreigners would benefit nobody."

Hmmm. Maomao sipped the horse-milk alcohol they had in lieu of tea. It was from the unpoisoned supply, of course.

"As it turned out, however, these visitors were not people who should have been let into Li lightly."

"Did they include a foreign VIP?"

"Yes, although I didn't know that at first. My suspicions only took shape gradually."

"How so?"

Shikyou held up his pointer finger. "The fact that they asked me about the Moon Prince's presence in the area, for one thing. Then there were the pursuers who showed up shortly after these visitors did. They seemed awfully persistent—too much so to be after an ordinary merchant. A good deal of trouble, they were. Also, the fact that there were wanted posters going around—at first, I thought my new friends might be criminals, but that didn't seem to be quite the

case. Finally, they claimed to be from Shaoh, but they had northern accents. Visitors from Shaoh, with which Li has diplomatic relations, would be one thing—but if they were from Hokuaren, ah, that could be a problem."

"Hokuaren," Maomao echoed. When Shikyou mentioned the wanted posters, she remembered the paper the bear-man had consulted.

"I thought they might be plotting to assassinate the Moon Prince, but that wasn't how they behaved. They had some other objective."

"Like what?"

They'd clearly gone out of their way to arrive while Jinshi was there. Why?

"A desperate bid for political asylum, perhaps. Maybe they thought that with the Moon Prince near at hand, their pursuers from their own nation would find it hard to cross the border. I keep asking myself whether their methods were ingenious or insane, and I come up with a different answer every time."

I can see how that would be a lot of trouble, Maomao thought. Meanwhile, the man before her had been keeping his head down and running...

"The swarm held us up something terrible," Shikyou said. "It generated a lot of anti-foreign sentiment, but fortunately we were able to find safe haven in the post town, thanks to my uncle Dahai. I admit, though, I started to sweat when our dear guest fell ill and suddenly needed a doctor."

Maomao paused. *A VIP...at the post town...who needed a doctor?*

That rang a very, very loud bell.

"This VIP. Were they a child, by any chance?"

"That's right."

Maomao put her head in her hands. *I knew it.*

"I couldn't cool my heels in the port town forever, but my father's death complicated matters."

"What changed with Master Gyoku-ou's passing?"

"If you had the choice between someone who would lend a sympathetic ear to a foreigner's plight and someone who wouldn't, who would you rather talk to? These foreigners... I think maybe it's time I put a name to them. This child was a very important member of the kingdom of the Ri people. They sent someone to come get him, on account of things having largely quieted down in their

lands."

The kingdom of the Ri people...

Maomao had a vague sense that the country was part of Hokuaren, but she didn't know anything beyond that.

"They wanted me to speak with the Moon Prince on their behalf. Which I was just on my way to do when..." Shikyou patted his side, right about where the poisoned dart had hit him. "They got me as soon as I entered the estate. I reflexively took out the guards by the gate. Unfortunately, that was a mistake. Since I didn't know where the assassin was hiding, though, I made for the passageway so I could lie low for a moment and pull out the dart."

"That was when Gyokujun and Xiaohong came along. Xiaohong went in search of a doctor and found me, and then I treated you," Maomao said. The dots were starting to connect. "So do you know who told the kids about the passageway?"

Shikyou was silent. He didn't want to acknowledge that it had been his own younger brother Hulan.

"Fine. Next question. Was there really a point to making me flee with you?"

"Well, I was suddenly a criminal, a kidnapper of a foreign dignitary. Once you treated me, people were going to think you were involved, whether you liked it or not. One basic rule in diplomatic relations is: never let the other guy see something that might be disadvantageous to your own country." Black sheep though he might be, Shikyou had learned an eldest son's lessons well enough to understand that. "Since I was attacked with a blowdart from somewhere within the estate, it seemed more than likely that there was someone on the inside. That's what Chue said. So, yes. I'm sure you're right. Hulan was behind this."

"You think so, sir?"

So it had been Chue's decision to get Maomao out of there. Maomao, who had already made contact with this foreign dignitary —she might not have known it at the time, but no one would believe her if she said so. Most of all, the moment Chue realized they had been betrayed from within, she would know that the turncoat might eventually catch Maomao.

"If I could meet with the foreign dignitary and safely turn him over to the Ri kingdom, we could let you go. But of course, first we had to make sure we weren't handing him over to a political enemy. Meanwhile, we needed to keep you and my niece out of

sight—and shake off our pursuers. Not to mention, I was desperate to get word to the Moon Prince. That was probably the biggest problem of all."

In other words, what he wants to say is that he's been a busy man.

"Naturally, not everything could go right. Our VIP scented danger and ditched the post town. Instead, he headed for another meeting spot, a place we'd arranged in advance in case anything happened. That's why we had to keep you hanging for a while."

"And one of the people on the trail of this dignitary of yours was One-Eyed Dragon," Maomao said.

"That name's wasted on him. Call him bear-man; that's enough for his like. You know about his grudge against me. I'm sure he was thrilled to take on this job. I use this town all the time when I'm preparing for a job. He probably thought he could ambush me here." Shikyou paused. "It's a terrible thing I've done."

He was understandably upset, knowing that the bandits had chosen to take over this town because of him. No small number of people had died because of the bear-man.

"But you're here now. That means you were able to safely hand over the VIP, doesn't it?" Maomao asked.

"Yeah. Reinforcements from the Moon Prince arrived a couple of days ago and helped wrap everything up nice and neat. I wanted to come for you sooner, but I was afraid of what the bear-man might do if he thought I was sniffing around. I never meant to use you and Xiaohong as bait. I know, I know. That sounds like an excuse, and I'm sorry. But it never crossed my mind that they might confuse Xiaohong for my foreign dignitary."

"I know that. Normally, I don't think they would have."

One-Eyed Dragon—ahem, the bear-man—had only mistaken Xiaohong for the foreign prince because he couldn't read. The portrait on the poster wasn't colored; the finer points of the visitor's identification were given only in a written list. The hair color, maybe that was an understandable mistake, but getting the eye color wrong? Only someone who hadn't read the list could have done that.

It's not that he didn't *read it, but that he* couldn't.

And if most of the outlaws were illiterate, that meant certain things could be slipped past them. Maomao looked at the sleeve of her robe. She'd changed from the woolen work outfit into the robe that had been laundered. The sleeve was embellished with

embroidery of a sparrow, delicate work that went well beyond "patching the tears." The outfit hadn't *had* any tears.

Such delicate stitching could never have been achieved with a few minutes' work, so Maomao thought maybe the sparrow had been there all along, and the woman had added the string of words.

It was almost as if whoever had done the stitching had known that Maomao had no interest in clothing, and had known that she would pick up on "patching the tears," like it was a code word. It was the sort of thing someone would have to know Maomao very well to orchestrate. The words on the sleeve had been such that only she would understand, and she would do exactly as they ordered.

There must have already been a collaborator in this town. The middle-aged woman, Maomao was sure of it. No wonder she had already known that Maomao and Xiaohong were supposed to be mother and child. She always had seemed suspiciously talkative for a homespun resident of a nowhere burg.

"Did you have some prearranged mode of communication?" she asked.

"I just sneaked in and told her. Well, by which I mean we had an arranged drop point where I left written communications."

"You had someone who could do that?"

"Sure. Someone who's very good at it."

Maomao thought for a second. "Would that be your lady biaoshi?"

"You got it."

"Don't tell me. Is she—"

Before Maomao could get the question out, the door opened.

There stood the lady biaoshi. Thirtyish, gallant, but oddly approachable. Maomao squinted and took the woman in from head to toe. She was tall, and her voice was deep and clear. Yet something nagged at Maomao. Nagged at her enough that she was moved to ask:

"Miss Chue?"

It hardly seemed possible, and yet...

"Hee hee! Oopsie! Figured me out?" The lady biaoshi struck an absolutely silly pose. The commanding, collected image she'd maintained until that moment shattered like glass.

"Please spare me your strange behaviors when you're dressed like that. My brain can't keep up," Maomao said.

In fact, she was wondering how someone could turn into such a different person. Chue's height was different by some nine centimeters; the very structure of her body seemed to belong to someone else. Her movements, usually crowned with her unmistakable footsteps, were every inch those of a trained soldier.

Most of all, Chue had been ninety-percent comedy, leaving Maomao to wonder who the tough-looking biaoshi was.

"This is my most bestest disguise that I have more confidence in than any other, and you still saw through it, Miss Maomao. Hrm. My poor self-confidence! It's been taking a beating lately!"

"If it makes you feel any better, I would never have realized if it weren't for this embroidery." Maomao showed Chue the design of a sparrow—a *chue*—right there on her sleeve. It almost felt like a tease. This little hint at the lady biaoshi's true identity had been like a message from Chue saying that she would soon come to rescue Maomao and Xiaohong. Maomao suspected Chue had several collaborators in the town, and that they exchanged information via code words.

"By any chance, is the man they called laoshi also an acquaintance of yours?" she asked.

"Very clever!" Chue said.

Maomao let out a sigh. No wonder Chue had been so hell-bent on teaching her the line from the scriptures. If only she'd also said *why* she was teaching it to her! Well, it was too late to complain now.

"I think you have a few things to explain too, Miss Chue."

"Fair enough! Where shall we start?"

With that, Chue let down her hair, and the piercing gleam in her eyes changed to something more like the pleasant look that Maomao was used to. Chue rubbed her fingers over her skin, and little white flakes came off—she hadn't just used makeup to change her skin tone; she'd used a special glue to change the shape of her face.

"Maybe you could tell me how you and Master Shikyou are related," Maomao said, looking from one of them to the other. Chue gave a broad grin. Maomao went on, "Miss Chue, you always talked about Master Shikyou as if he were a good-for-nothing, or at least someone I should keep my distance from."

"That's right. I was telling the truth the whole time, you know!" Chue said, the drawl returning to her voice. "You remember those

bandits who attacked us, Miss Maomao? They really did work for Shikyou once."

That was when they had gone out to the farming village with Lahan's Brother. Basen had left those particular scofflaws in a sorry state.

"In the sense that they were at the biaoshi agency when I bought it," Shikyou said. "But they were always ruffians. I kicked out everyone I couldn't trust to guard our charges, and the ones who really didn't like it took up banditry in our territory, or joined up with the bear-man."

I guess a biaoshi agency can't have untrustworthy people around, can it?

Maomao wondered where that left the men who had explained what was going on and then abandoned her in the woods. Yes, they had broken with their job, but in her eyes they had been honorable about it.

"Does this somehow also explain the incident with the wine?" Maomao asked.

"Oh! Er...ahem, no. That was stuff I meant for my own private consumption, but I didn't have anything to put it in—until I found the perfect empty bottles. But then someone mistook them for a shipment and sent them out." Shikyou fidgeted uneasily. At least he was telling the truth, but he had still done his aunt a bad turn.

"You see how he is! And you wonder why I thought you should keep your distance, Miss Maomao," said Chue. She'd finally shed all of her biaoshi makeup—it really was her under there.

"Huh! So that's the story." Maomao had the sense that they were still hiding something, but she decided to take what she could get for now. "I still don't know how the two of you are connected. Miss Chue, maybe you could tell me what it is you've been up to?"

"Certainly. I don't mind saying, my life has been very hard since I escorted you away from the main house. Uncovering the traitor who attacked Shikyou, explaining matters to the Moon Prince, and keeping our dear quack off the trail! But worst of all was that strategist. Do you know how I toiled? How hard I worked? Of course, then I met up with you, and the Moon Prince and our quack and the master strategist became someone else's problem."

She didn't go into the details of how she had kept them all at bay, but it obviously hadn't been easy.

"I managed everything except the traitor bit before I met up

with you, and after that I had to keep you on the move. The western capital was still dangerous, not to mention we had to shield the Moon Prince from any suspicion of involvement with the kidnapping of the Ri VIP."

"Yes, I see that."

It also explained why Chue had disguised herself so thoroughly that even Maomao hadn't known who she was.

"Then I was busy handing the VIP off to the Ri folks. That was in the next town down the road, while you both waited here in this one. I planned to get us all back to the western capital once any suspicion of kidnapping had been cleared up."

"But you hadn't counted on 'bear-man' being here."

"Right! That was my biggest miscalculation! I had a bad feeling, but I had no idea he'd entrenched himself so deeply. Speaking of which, who would ever have expected him to confuse poor Xiaohong for the foreign dignitary and chase after her?!"

In a board game, there was one player whose moves you could never predict: a total amateur. And bear-man was no tactician. No doubt they really hadn't been able to guess what he would do.

"After that, I had no choice but to rethink my plans. I sure couldn't keep guarding you! Instead, once I was sure they wouldn't kill you, I got out of this town."

"Meaning once Xiaohong and I made contact with 'laoshi,' you left?"

"That's right."

Maomao wanted to spit a few choice words at her, but somehow she kept them down. Chue had had her own problems to worry about.

"I'd only scouted out the situation and made contact with a few of my coconspirators, so the pirates didn't know about me. But they did find the wagon before I got back, and once I was sure escape wasn't an option, I had to take a new tack!"

"So you left me to seek harbor as a 'fellow believer'?"

"That's right. The laoshi has never been one to lay a hand on a believer, and he'll do anything and everything to protect them."

Anything and everything, huh?

That had led him to leave the nonbelievers to their fate, but as much as Maomao detested that, it had saved her life. She was hardly in a position to criticize.

"Shikyou and his friends hadn't arrived in town yet. I couldn't

afford a confrontation with Bear-Man, and I couldn't let them know that the Ri dignitary was nearby. So I avoided this town and went to the next one to let them know, then prioritized safely handing over our VIP. What if I had come back on my own? I wouldn't have been able to overpower so many people. There were also perfectly good reasons I couldn't ask the Moon Prince to send help. Although eventually, he found the mole on his own and started working with Shikyou, which made everything easier! Once the dignitary was safely back with his people, I joined Shikyou and some agents from his biaoshi agency and headed here."

"Is that why you sent the message through your collaborator? The hint that you would be here soon?"

"Yes, that's right. It didn't really matter whether you noticed and understood it or not, but I knew you would, Miss Maomao! And I've got to say, my life was a lot easier than it could have been thanks to you poisoning all the bandits. In fact, I'm awfully curious how you managed to do it. Care to share your secrets?"

Maomao wasn't thrilled to have Chue praising her. Poisoning folks wasn't really something an apothecary should be doing.

"It helped that most of the marauders don't have very discriminating palates."

Eating the tainted potatoes would cause tingling. Notwithstanding the spices she'd used to cover the sensation, she'd expected a few people to notice. Some of the bandits had had milder symptoms than others, and she suspected it was those who'd noticed how the potatoes tasted and refrained from eating too many of them.

"In addition to the potato peels and buds, I took the liberty of making use of the snake venom and some nutmeg. I mixed a bit of extra alcohol into the horse-milk drink, to get them drunk a bit easier, and for a secret ingredient I mixed in a few of those mushrooms that make you viciously drunk."

Neither Chue nor Shikyou said anything.

"What's with the looks?"

"Miss Maomao, you really pulled out all the stops on your poisoning attempt."

"Well, it was my life on the line."

If it was kill or be killed, even Maomao would choose the former.

"I'm impressed you were able to get so many poisons in one

place," Shikyou commented.

"There's poison everywhere, sir. It's only a matter of knowing how to use it."

They were getting off topic. She decided to bring them back to the main subject. "Would you answer me two questions?"

"If we can, sure!"

"You said you handed over the dignitary. What form did that take, exactly?"

Chue smirked at that. "Don't worry your pretty head. The dignitary isn't anyone you need to be concerned about, Miss Maomao."

That sounded a bit evasive, but at least the "dignitary" seemed to be safe. He might have been a selfish kid with a rotten tooth, but it would have left a bad taste in Maomao's mouth if he'd met some foul end.

"What's your second question?" Chue asked.

After a moment, Maomao said, "It's about who attacked Master Shikyou."

"Oh, Miss Maomao, I think you already know."

Stupid Chue, being so perceptive. It was Maomao's way not to speak of a thing even when she already knew it.

Besides, she had questions. Why had Xiaohong come to fetch her? How had she known about the secret passageway? She'd quietly asked Xiaohong how she had known that Shikyou was there. And the answer? *"My uncle told me."*

Hulan. Gyoku-ou's ever-humble third son. The only substantially younger child among the four siblings.

Finally, Maomao saw that they wouldn't get anywhere if she didn't come out and say it. "What did Master Hulan want out of this?"

"Good question! And the answer is surprisingly simple. It was a straightforward succession dispute," Chue said. She made it sound almost banal, yet Shikyou looked conflicted. Chue went on, "Still, Miss Chue had other reasons for coming here." She turned to Shikyou. "Why are you leaving those bandits alive?" She drawled just like she always did, but her words were uncommonly forceful.

"I'm not a civil official," Shikyou snapped. "It's not my place to hang them or lop off their heads."

"Youuu're gonna regret it! We're here today because you let one of them off with just a gouged-out eye. Let's pop those heads off

their shoulders, whaddaya say? We can make it look like...well, anything we want, right now." She made a slashing motion with her hand. A clowning touch on a cruel pronouncement.

"I broke their arms so they can't try anything. We'll hand them over to the authorities; that's enough."

"If you say so..." Chue cocked her head and turned away. "Not much I can do if you insist. Just make sure you're ready for the consequences. There's nothing more frightening than a wounded beast."

"Believe me, I know."

"Do you? A soft touch like you is never going to become successor."

"Believe me... I know," Shikyou said.

Chue didn't respond, but stood and left the room.

Chapter 23: The Road Home

"The answer is surprisingly simple. It was a straightforward succession dispute."

Something bothered Maomao. It couldn't be as simple as Chue said. Not that that was any reason for Maomao to go sticking her nose into things.

Okay, now.

Most of the problems Maomao was aware of had been solved, clearing the way for them to return to the western capital. There was no denying, though, that the wagon ride was awfully boring. Xiaohong, who was riding with her, was asleep, and Chue was on the driver's bench, leaving Maomao without much to do except stare at the passing scenery.

Maybe I should take this opportunity to get my thoughts in order.

She didn't know whether it would be any help to anyone, but she mentally reviewed the four siblings from the western capital.

There was Gyoku-ou's oldest son, Shikyou. He'd received an elite education, but hadn't wanted to do much with it, and now he ran a biaoshi agency. In Maomao's opinion, Shikyou could have single-handedly resolved the succession dispute without much fuss if only he'd been of a mind to do so. He wasn't as terrible a person as the rumors said, but he could stand to have it a little more together.

Then there was the oldest daughter—what was her name again? Yinxing, right. She was Xiaohong's mother. She came across as a strong woman, but life in I-sei Province seemed to be suffocating her. Maomao had given their departed bodyguards a letter about Xiaohong; she wondered if it had reached Yinxing. She felt bad about sending the men on a busy errand—almost as bad as she felt about giving up the pearls she had used to pay them. Maybe she could get Shikyou to compensate her. As the lone woman among the siblings, Yinxing had been less than happy about the division of the inheritance.

Feilong was the second son. A diligent and serious man, it was

almost as if he had taken his eldest brother as an example of what *not* to do with his life. Maomao had met him a few times but they had never really talked. If nothing else, she didn't hear any unsavory rumors about him.

Finally, there was the third and youngest son, Hulan. He'd always seemed a bit suspicious, but recent events had cast his duplicitousness into sharp relief. Now that Maomao thought about it, she saw that virtually all the trouble she'd had since Gyoku-ou's death had been brought on her by this one man. He always acted like he was just there to support Feilong—which might help explain why he would go after Shikyou's life.

Miss Chue called it a simple succession dispute.

True, if it was really nothing more than a quarrel between the first and second sons over who would follow in their father's footsteps, a lot of the pieces would fall into place. As a supporter of the second son, the youngest had tried to do away with the oldest. All well and good. And yet...

I feel like there's something else going on here.

Chue didn't always tell the whole truth.

Wondering and worrying, Maomao wrote a name on the floor of the wagon.

*None of those four siblings have "*Gyoku*" in their names.*

As far as she could tell, the "new You" clan had some unique rules regarding nomenclature in their household. The men were named after animals, the women—after colors, perhaps. It was a simple system and made a certain kind of broad sense.

It might still fit together, if the eldest son had chosen to throw away the Gyoku name. Otherwise you wouldn't expect him to have a name like Shikyou.

Shikyou was another name for the owl, a common symbol of wrongdoers. One could almost think that the eldest son was seeking to take the role of villain upon himself. His father, Gyoku-ou, had seen himself as a hero—and his son, almost in reaction, had taken the opposite path. Yet in spite of his playacting at villainy, in Maomao's opinion, Shikyou hadn't been able to escape his own basic decency. He was more heroic than Gyoku-ou had ever been.

He didn't deliberately wait until I was cornered before he burst in on Bear-Man, did he?

It had been almost like the climax of a play.

Then there was the second son's name, Feilong. It was common

enough; it meant “flying dragon.” It represented a wish that one’s son would soar like a dragon, or in more prosaic terms, that he would make it big in the world.

But what about the third son?

Hulan, “tiger and wolf.” Like *Shikyou*, it did not have a very favorable meaning. It seemed to symbolize greed and cruelty.

Maybe those animals don’t represent the same things in I-sei Province as they do where I come from? Maomao wondered. But, no—wolves couldn’t possibly be considered a very good thing in a land of shepherds who had to look after sheep and goats.

Maomao stuck her head out the window and looked at Chue, who was humming a tune as she drove along.

“Miss Chue, Miss Chue!”

“Miss Maomao, Miss Maomao, what is it?” Chue asked. She didn’t even glance in Maomao’s direction, and the wind made it a bit hard to hear her.

“Is there some kind of tradition in I-sei Province of giving the youngest child an inauspicious name?”

“Hmmm, good question. A custom of giving a bad name so that the child doesn’t die too soon? No, I don’t think so!” she drawled.

In spite of how she acted, Chue was something of an expert. Maomao had heard whispers of that tradition. Some people feared that Heaven would grow fond of a child that was too sweet, and deliberately chose “unclean” names to discourage an early death. Some, it was said, even named their children after excrement.

“Why do you ask?” Chue said.

“I was just thinking about Hulan. It sounds like the name of a stage villain.”

“Oh, him? They say the wife picked the name, because she thought he was least suited to be head of the clan.”

The wife?

That would be Xiaohong’s grandmother, the woman Maomao had met once when she’d gone to check on the girl.

“She picked a rather unusual name, didn’t she?” Maomao said.

“She spent all those years in a foreign country,” Chue replied. “Maybe it messed with her idea of what’s normal.”

“Yes, you mentioned that.”

Was that why Hulan alone was so much younger than his siblings?

“I don’t think it’s the only thing about her that got knocked a

bit out of whack while she was there. They say that after Master Hulan was born, she became a husk of a woman!" Still that same friendly drawl.

"Is that so?"

Maomao had a rather scandalous thought. *What if Hulan isn't Gyoku-ou's son?*

If he'd been conceived in that foreign land, it might explain why his mother had given him a "bad" name. For a moment, Maomao debated with herself whether to voice the question—then decided that if she were ever going to do it, this would be the moment.

"Is it possible, hypothetically, that Master Hulan isn't Master Gyoku-ou's real son?"

"Pffft!" Chue burst out laughing, louder than Maomao had ever heard her, although she didn't know what was so funny. Chue was always grinning, but this was the first time Maomao had seen her hold her sides and guffaw—which she somehow managed to do while also still holding on to the reins. That was some driving.

"Ha ha ha! Sorry, sorry. That... That's one thing I can tell you is definitely *not* the case."

"How can you be so sure?"

"He was born a full year after Master Gyoku-ou's wife came back, so we know she wasn't already carrying the child by some foreigner. Ah, of course, if you think someone sneaked into the house, it might be a different matter."

Maomao's idea must really have amused Chue, because she was grinning again at the thought of it. Maybe they had different ideas of what was funny. Maomao didn't really see a child's legitimacy as comedy gold.

Huh. Scratch one hypothesis.

She closed the window. There was a good, long stretch of bouncing along in the wagon ahead of her still. Maybe she should try to get some sleep.

It would take several days to get back to the western capital. The traveling party was much larger than the one had been on the way out, so instead of staying in towns, they camped out at night. Most of the group seemed used to this. They could put up simple tents in the blink of an eye—maybe some were former nomads. As Shikyou oversaw proceedings, Maomao, Xiaohong, and even Chue

were left with nothing to do but watch, as if they were merely guests.

"Uncle, you're amazing!" Xiaohong said, her eyes shining, as she watched Shikyou direct his people. Sitting there drinking a cup of warmed goat's milk, she looked like the child she was.

I think Xiaohong might have had it the hardest of any of us on this trip, Maomao thought. She'd almost begun to wonder what the catch was, the way Xiaohong had listened so obediently all throughout their adventures. Xiaohong had done everything Maomao had asked of her, even things plenty of adults couldn't have. Maomao was starting to think seriously (if rather naughtily) of spiriting the girl to the royal capital to train her as a medicine woman—an interesting possibility indeed.

"Miss Maomao, Miss Maomao, you're not plotting something, are you?" Chue asked. Maomao, for her part, tried to play dumb. Apparently she was not going to be allowed to just bring Xiaohong home like a puppy. Instead she said, "I have to admire your skills. I never expected camp food to be so good."

There was perfectly browned bread, covered in cheese toasted over the fire. The salty flavor of the gooey cheese was the perfect complement to the bread. The soup didn't have much in it, but the bone broth helped stimulate the appetite.

"Miss Chue only wishes she could offer bigger servings. None of us have been eating well recently!"

While in disguise as a biaoshi, Chue had eaten like an ordinary person. If she'd consumed her usual quantities, Maomao might have figured out who she was sooner. In fact, Maomao was starting to think that Chue's panoply of quirky behaviors was, in part, precisely so that she wouldn't be noticed when she was undercover.

"It's hard to get enough to eat when you're roughing it," Maomao said.

"And dragging along all these bandits! Do we really have to feed them? Maybe their portions should go to Miss Chue!"

"Even criminals get hungry, Miss Chue—and we can't have them starving before we get them in front of a magistrate, can we?"

"Aw, they're just going to hang them. I think it would be easiest to just get them out of the way." Once again, Chue's cheerful tone belied the cruelty of her words.

They probably will hang, won't they?

The outlaws had subjugated an entire town, killing and

enslaving the citizens. Not to mention that they had conspired to kidnap a foreign dignitary. It would be hard to talk their way out of all that. As such, the grunts had been handed over to the authorities in the next town over, where they would be treated to swift executions. Bear-Man and a few of the other ringleaders, though, were being taken back to the western capital. Their crimes were too great to be dealt with by local officials.

"What will happen to the townspeople who were forced to help the bandits?" Maomao asked.

"Mmm. I guess they're not exactly blameless, are they? You could argue for extenuating circumstances, to a degree, but still..."

I think their "laoshi" is going to have a particularly hard time.

It was thanks to him that so many of the townspeople had in fact survived—but to achieve that, he had chosen to save his fellow believers and condemn the nonbelievers. That wasn't even mentioning how he had cozied up to the bandits in order to keep himself alive.

"What will happen to the man they called the laoshi?" Maomao asked.

"He's hardly innocent, and even if he took his punishment and came back, there wouldn't be a place for him there. I can't see them returning him to his position after he left all those nonbelievers to die!" Chue chirped.

"I see..."

Maomao felt absolutely helpless. He'd done what he'd had to do, true enough, but the human heart was not so easily appeased.

"It's nothing for you to get upset about, Miss Maomao. The laoshi did everything he could to protect his fellow believers, and he won't regret that, no matter what happens to him."

Chue sounded oddly like she knew the man. All signs seemed to suggest that she had been in I-sei Province before.

"The main point is, I think we can blame everything that's happened on Shikyou and his soft way of doing things. He should've taken both eyes when he had the chance, not stopped at one. And what about this time? He should have lopped off Bear-Man's head on the spot instead of handing him over to the authorities."

"My uncle's very nice," Xiaohong said, giving Chue a bit of a nasty look. Maomao guessed she thought Chue was insulting Shikyou. "I think he's definitely the best one to be head of the clan

too!"

"You're a big fan of your uncle, huh?" Maomao asked, sipping some goat's milk.

"You're not wrong. Your uncle *is* a nice guy, and he holds authority over others, so maybe he would make a good clan leader," Chue said. "But he's not cut out to be successor."

"Isn't that a contradiction in terms?" Maomao asked.

"No. No, it's not." Chue licked the last of the crumbs off her fingers, clearly wishing she had more bread, and took a swig of goat's milk.

The next day, the wagon took a road that was not one they had traveled while coming out.

"Isn't this the wrong way?" Maomao asked Chue, who wasn't on the driver's bench today, but under the wagon's cover with Maomao. Xiaohong was sharing a horse with her uncle. She must have been having a good time; it certainly offered better views than the back of the wagon.

"Not wrong, just different. We're following the mountains today."

Maomao would have guessed that going straight across the plains would be faster, but for some reason they were taking a circuitous route. "Why the change?"

"Because if we keep going straight, we'll meet an uncle just about Shikyou's age. Didn't I tell you about them before? And how they get along?"

An uncle about Shikyou's age? That had to be Gyokuen's sixth or seventh son. Maomao realized she had heard about him. "You mean the one he fought in a duel using real swords?"

"That's the one! The reason Shikyou showed up later than we did is because he took the long way around to avoid running into him. Since, in a way, you could say the two of them are closer than anybody." She sounded completely earnest.

Does that guy ever stop causing trouble?

Maomao looked around. The landscape they were traversing was no longer grassy plains, but a kind of rocky desert. There were cliffs to either side. "And that's why we're going this way?" she asked.

"It's actually the shortest route, distance-wise. We only had the one wagon when we were coming out, so we avoided it, but the big

caravans all use this road."

A road you couldn't use if your traveling party was too small? That meant one thing: bandits. Certainly nobody would be stupid enough to attack them with the number of guards they had at this point.

Or at least, so you'd think. But Maomao couldn't shake her anxiety. "I think I would have preferred the regular route," she said. The mountainous terrain was no fun at all, since she had to endure the constant bouncing and rocking of the wagon. "Wasn't there some other detour we could have taken?"

"The northern route is already snowed in at this time of year. The horses get very tired, and you need somewhere to camp and plenty of fuel."

If, in Chue's considered judgment, this was the best choice, then so be it. Yet Maomao thought she saw the slightest hint of darkness in Chue's expression. "I do hope we get out of here soon," she said, and gazed out from the wagon as the barren landscape rolled past.

They took frequent breaks along the way so as not to tire the horses too much. One of the wagons was carrying feed and water for the animals, and the horses dug greedily into the bucket of hay. Xiaohong had a handful of something white; she must've been feeding them too.

"She's giving rock salt to the horses," Maomao observed.

"Right! Those poor creatures do sweat so much," Chue said.

It felt like a waste, but it was probably necessary. She'd heard that there were even huge deer that lived far to the north that liked to drink human urine.

"Hmm." Chue made a bit of a funny face as she prepared the food.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing. We've just got plenty of reasons to be anxious around here, and I can't quite settle down," she said, expertly wielding a small knife to slice some dried meat. If even the ever-upbeat Chue was openly worried, they might be in trouble. Watching, Maomao felt a nameless but undeniable fear creep over her.

"Miss Chue... Are you sure you should say things like that in front of me?"

Chue goggled for a second. "You're right, that was careless of me. But my current job is to see to your safety, Miss Maomao. I'll

protect you no matter what—don't you worry about a thing."

It was strange for Chue. When even Maomao could tell she was on edge, it meant there was something big in store.

"You still look pretty worried," Maomao observed.

"Miss Chue might not look it, but she's a perfectionist, so she'd like to get rid of any sources of anxiety," Chue said, drawling again.

"Such as what? Bear-Man can't run away now, can he?"

"No, indeed. We bound him hand and foot and broke both his arms. That definitely rules out him wielding any weapons, but..." Chue furrowed her brow ever so slightly.

"That sounds like you were pretty thorough. What kind of trouble do you think he could get up to?"

"Under normal circumstances, even Miss Chue would never be able to beat him, Miss Maomao. Bound or not, a bear is still a bear. All it takes is one good bite and you're done." Chue mimed chomping at the air. "But there's something scarier than fury like a tiger's. It's someone with the tenacity of a snapping turtle."

I get what she's saying.

"Bear-Man" had interfered with Shikyou's jobs on more than one occasion in retaliation for his missing eye, and if they hadn't apprehended him this time, he probably would have done it again. And now, he had plenty of reason to hate Maomao too.

"I really do doubt he can get away," Chue said, but her tone didn't inspire much confidence.

"I hope you're right."

The other woman set down her knife, while Maomao busied herself hoping that nothing would go wrong.

Chue's intuition, however, proved correct.

Chapter 24: A Wounded Beast

They didn't manage to cross the rocky desert that day, so they had to pitch camp on the wastes that night. It was cold, and Maomao wrapped herself in a blanket in addition to her usual outerwear. Her breath fogged in front of her each time she exhaled, and her ears stung so badly she thought they might fall off. This was no grassy plain, and the ground resisted their attempts to drive pegs into it, making it hard to pitch their tents. Instead, they slept in the wagons.

When Chue saw Maomao shivering, she left to get more blankets.

If she could just get to sleep, Maomao thought, it would soon be morning, but sleep eluded her. Just as she thought she was finally drifting off, her eyes snapped open again. It was hard to keep them open against the cold and the fatigue and the general torpor, but she forced herself. The wagon's cover was dyed red.

Still clasping the blanket around her, Maomao leaned outside. One of the other wagons was on fire, tongues of flame licking the air. The horses whinnied, and men raced to douse the blaze. The fire was much more violent than she might have expected; it must have been the feed cart that had caught.

With everyone distracted by the burning wagon, nobody noticed the figure approaching Maomao.

"Hngh?!" she exclaimed as she felt a blow to her side. No sooner had she registered the pain than she tumbled out of the wagon and hit the ground.

She heard a voice growl, "You little witch..."

She looked up to see the one-eyed Bear-Man. His single remaining eye was red, and blood dribbled from his mouth. He was missing several of his front teeth, but in exchange the ropes around his hands and feet dangled free. He must have chewed through them.

His broken arms hung limply at his sides. To the right one he had lashed a metal club—less to support himself, it seemed, than to

use as a weapon.

"At least...I can kill you!"

The bear-man didn't even seem to feel pain anymore.

Maomao guessed that it was the non-club hand that had slammed into her, indicating Bear-Man's intention not to knock her out, but to leave her conscious so he could torment her.

He's going to kill me.

Maomao's thick blanket had absorbed some of the impact, but it still hurt. She had to get to her feet, had to run away.

Bear-Man advanced on her. Maomao crawled backward and tried to get up, but she couldn't. Her body was still numb and unsteady from the fall. If only she could run to the others, they might be able to do something. If only...

Bear-Man was faster, though, and launched himself at her before she could flee. Her only thought was of protecting her head; she covered her face and squeezed her eyes shut.

She had no idea how much time passed then. It could have been an instant, it could have been half an hour.

Bear-Man's fist never fell on her.

Instead, she heard Chue's voice. "Pardon me, Miss Maomao!"

Maomao opened her eyes. Against the backdrop of the blazing wagon, she saw the silhouette of Bear-Man with Chue on top of him. Something sprayed from what she took to be his neck.

"I look away for one second..." Chue said. She hopped off of Bear-Man, and he slumped to the ground. "Sorry I'm not more presentable. Are you hurt?"

"No," Maomao said slowly. "I'm all right." Relief warred with amazement inside her. Chue's face was covered with Bear-Man's blood. Maomao was just glad Xiaohong hadn't been in the wagon with her. She must still be with her uncle.

"I told him we should have cleaned up this loose end."

A strangled voice said, "Ya...couldthn't be more righth..."

Chue instantly turned and caught the fist that swung down at her. Actually, it might be better to say the fist was dropped on her. Bear-Man's arm had no more bones left to support its movements.

Maomao heard the bones in his already shattered arms being pulverized further; even Chue jumped back as if to shield herself from the blow.

The bear-man's crushed arms hung feebly at his sides, and blood still poured from his mouth and neck. Anyone else would

have been dead long ago, so how was he still alive? He was like one of those snakes that kept slithering along even after you hacked off its head.

Chue, however, moved promptly to stand in front of Maomao. In her left hand she held her knife. She gritted her teeth and drove it toward Bear-Man's chest, sinking the blade into the space between his ribs, just a little left of center. "Please let this be the end," she grunted.

This isn't the first time she's done this, Maomao realized. Chue drew the knife back out without a moment's hesitation, almost businesslike.

Still Bear-Man remained on his feet. "Ah'm...not d-d...done...yeth..."

He raised his hand again, and Chue hopped backward. Just at that moment, there was a *thock*, and an arrow buried itself in Bear-Man's other eye.

"You really don't know when to quit," a man said with pity in his voice. It was Shikyou. He raised his hand, and his troops let loose with their arrows. Bear-Man gave a piercing scream; if there were words in there, it was impossible to make them out.

When the voice finally ceased, the bandit who had dubbed himself One-Eyed Dragon loomed there—dead, but still standing.

"I'm sorry. He took advantage of the moment I was distracted by the fire." Shikyou was speaking to Maomao, but Maomao was more worried about Chue.

"Miss Maomao..." Chue said. "You really must pardon me." She was smiling just like she always did—but what got Maomao's attention was that the knife was in her left hand.

"Miss Chue!" Maomao placed a hand on Chue's right shoulder. There was something wrong with it. She looked down, and although shadows obscured the sight, she thought she saw a dark discoloration. She touched Chue's right arm and found it slick.

"Gosh, I really am sorry. Miss Chue just made a little slip," Chue drawled. Her eyes were unfocused. When had she gotten injured? Maomao thought she had only closed her eyes for an instant; how many blows had they traded in that brief time?

Blood was seeping from Chue's stomach too. Maomao immediately picked her up and carried her to the wagon. Bear-Man was in bad shape, but Chue was hardly better.

"Somebody boil some water! And bring me my medical

supplies!” Maomao shouted. She didn’t care if she *was* speaking to Shikyou.

“Y-Yeah, right away,” he said.

Maomao, meanwhile, stripped off Chue’s robe. Her broken arm was practically torn in half, and her abdomen was covered in contusions. Both injuries were serious, but Maomao needed to prioritize checking her internal organs.

Chue’s body was also covered in a host of old scars that, in their way, bespoke her personal history. Some of them looked to be from wounds a warrior would have been proud to take on the battlefield; others were clearly the result of torture.

“Miss Maomao…”

“Don’t talk!” Maomao commanded frantically.

“Oh, do let me… Do let me talk.” Chue brushed Maomao’s cheek with her left hand. “My right hand won’t be any use after this, will it?”

“We don’t know that yet!”

“Sure we do. Its day is done!”

Maomao found herself speechless. The hand was, in truth, barely still attached.

Maomao rued how easily Chue had seen through her. She didn’t have the skill to reattach a severed limb. She could try, but chances were it would hardly function—if it didn’t simply rot off.

“If you think you can save it…then you should attend to my hand before my tummy.”

“Absolutely not. Abdomen first.” Internal organs were much more important to keeping her alive than her arm. The wound to her stomach was the priority.

“No… No. Without that hand, I have no value. Without that hand, that’s the end.”

“That’s not true.” Maomao took out what medicine she had with her: coagulants, cough suppressants, cold medicine. What was the point of any of it? “My life would be much harder without you, Miss Chue, so this *can’t* be the end. Whatever happens, you have to live!”

Maomao waited impatiently for Shikyou with the tools and water and fire. Outside, the other wagon was still blazing.

“Hoo hoo hoo… Miss Maomao, I might start to think you love me,” Chue said. Always that drawl.

“Yes! Yes, I love you, so please stop talking!”

At least if she was chattering so much, it suggested her lungs were in working order.

“That’s terrific. A confession of love from Miss Maomao! I’ll have to brag about it to the Moon Prince…” Chue almost looked innocent, childlike. “To be loved, even just for a little while—that’s a wonderful thing. You almost…start to think it means there’s a place you belong.”

Maomao didn’t say anything; she was too busy sliding her fingers along Chue’s abdomen. There was every possibility that one of her ribs had broken and pierced something.

“I know you have your circumstances, Miss Maomao. It’s important not to get carried away by your emotions! But…” Chue brushed Maomao’s cheek again with her bloodstained hand. “You can’t let that be an excuse either.”

She laughed again. *“Hoo hoo hoo!”* And then, without further ado, she closed her eyes.

Maomao blinked—and then she rushed to take Chue’s pulse. She could still feel it: *ba-bum, ba-bum*.

“Here,” Shikyou said. “Your water and tools.”

She took the supplies from him. She clutched a surgical knife in one hand and grabbed some disinfectant alcohol with the other.

I don’t know what she means by that, Maomao thought, biting her lip, *but I’m not letting her go without a fight.*

She felt her fists clench, and then she started the surgery.

Chapter 25: The Ugly Little Sparrow

The young Beghura—her name meant “sparrow”—was a happy girl. Her father was in the trading business and had married, although he was no longer a young man. He claimed that when he saw her beautiful mother, he’d fallen in love as badly as any besotted boy. And you didn’t have to be Beghura’s father to notice the woman’s beauty. Slim and tall, skin the color of an elephant’s tusk, a body that was all flowing lines and smooth curves.

It was, so Beghura had heard, by pure coincidence that her father had met her mother, who came from another land. Her mother had been on a ship from a neighboring country called Shaoh. The ship had wrecked in a storm, and her mother had been rescued by her father’s merchant vessel. Things weren’t easy at first, for she couldn’t communicate. But Beghura’s father spoke excellent Shaohnese and took her mother under his wing. He gave her a job and taught her the language.

He had every intention of sending her back to Shaoh as soon as he could, but things kept getting in the way. Her husband and child had been on the Shaohnese ship with her and had died in the wreck. She had no family in her native land—even if she went back, there was nowhere for her to go.

Beghura’s father was a merchant, but he was also a thoroughly decent man; his business had grown by the esteem in which people held him. He would never abandon this woman to her fate, alone in the world as she was. And this was when his boyish love, so unbecoming in a man more than forty years old, showed itself.

Beghura’s mother might have been a foreigner with only a modest command of the language, but she was a hard worker. In no time at all, the servants came to accept her as the lady of the house.

Beghura’s mother continued to be an excellent helper to her father after they were married. Beghura especially loved to see them go to church together, hand in hand. The three of them would spend the day of rest praying together, and then they would have a meal somewhere before they went home.

“What I really meant to do, eventually, was adopt a relative’s child or something,” her father said. The year after he was married, however, Beghura was born. She was a girl, yes, but her father, who had never imagined he would have a child of his own, was overjoyed. For ten days following the birth of his daughter, he handed out sweets to everyone who went past his shop.

Her mother chose the name Beghura. It was the name of a small bird, her father said, an adorable little animal. Beghura looked nothing like her slim, lovely mother; she took after her short, stout father. Smallish eyes, a nose so abbreviated it looked like it might have been broken off—and not very tall either. But love is indeed blind, and Beghura’s father bragged about her to everyone in his family.

Beghura was not what could be called beautiful, but at least she had some brains to make up for it. She was walking less than a year after her birth; within two years, she was a voluble talker. After three, her father watched her with a grin and wondered who she would grow up to be.

Yes, Beghura had brains enough. Enough to remember that her mother had vanished before she was three years old—and to remember what she was like just before she left.

Her mother disappeared one day, out of the blue. Her father was inconsolable. The employees, meanwhile, were in an uproar, astonished and confused and desperate to know what was happening.

Her father commissioned portrait after portrait from various artists, and spent his days searching. Maybe, he thought, she had been the victim of a crime. As he searched, however, strange details began to emerge.

For one thing, it appeared that information about her father’s business dealings had been leaked. There was no concrete proof, but suspicious patterns began to appear in his imports and exports from other countries.

Beghura got her quick-wittedness from her father. He might have attracted the business with his winning personality, but that wasn’t enough to build a merchant concern. He wouldn’t ignore even the slightest sense that something was wrong. He checked the patterns in the account books for the several years since Beghura’s mother had arrived—and found a connection with one particular

nation.

Li: a country bordering Shaoh. It had no diplomatic relations with Beghura's country, but it did lie to the east of Shaoh, just as her own land lay to its west. Beghura's mother had claimed to be Shaohnese, but she looked rather more like someone from Li. It hadn't raised his suspicions then; there were plenty of people of mixed origins in Shaoh.

"I *will* find your mother. I swear I will!" he said to Beghura, and then he gave her a copy of the scriptures and told her to study. With nothing else to do, Beghura had one of the servants read them to her.

"Your mother must have had some reason. I'm sure there was something that forced her to do what she did," her father insisted, and for the first time, Beghura thought he was being stupid.

Years later, her father said he might have found her mother. Someone who matched the portrait exactly had been located in Li. Full of joy, he boarded a boat and sailed for Li at once.

Beghura regretted it later: she should have reached out to him that day. He should have thought of her mother as dead. The two of them could have lived a perfectly happy life together.

But that dream was destined not to come true.

Her father never returned.

What happens to children who lose their parents? If Beghura had been a little older, things might have been different—but for a girl not even ten years old, there was nothing she could do. In less than a month, her father's assets had been pillaged; there was nothing left. Funny, how a rich man turns out to have so many relatives the moment he dies. Beghura was left with just a few gold coins, given to her by a servant who felt some modicum of loyalty to her father.

If her father had been in his right mind, he would have appointed a guardian for his daughter. Beautiful her mother might have been, but she had driven her father mad.

"If anything ever happens to me, go to the church," he had said, and that was what Beghura did, clutching her coins. The pastor there was a basically decent person, and out of compassion he tried to send Beghura to the poorhouse, but she knew that was a bad idea. The moment her handful of gold coins was discovered, they were taken from her.

Beghura knew what her goal should be. There was a teacher in the church who said that he wished to spread the teachings to the east. Indeed, he would be leaving very soon.

"Please, take me with you," Beghura said.

The teacher, a fortyish man who was somewhat distant at the best of times, said, "I can't be having a child tag along." He was well-built; he used to be a bodyguard for the teacher of a particularly large church. Brawn like his would be essential when going to a foreign land full of heretics and unbelievers.

Beghura was just a child. No brawn, no power. She had only one thing:

"O Lord, do You see us?"

She knew the scriptures by heart after hearing them read to her so many times—after asking to have them read to her so many times. She could recite every line without a word out of place, and now she did so.

The teacher listened to her in silence.

"Please," she said again, "take me with you."

If she had no value, no one would so much as look at her. She'd been valuable to her father because she was his daughter. Valuable to his servants and employees because she was their employer's daughter.

So she demonstrated that she could be a useful pawn in the teacher's campaign of evangelism. Moreover, Beghura was her mother's daughter as well; her face looked eastern. All she had to do was pick up the language, and she could be all kinds of help on the road.

The teacher looked very reluctant for a very long moment, but finally, mercifully, he caved. Maybe he realized that Beghura no longer had anywhere else to go.

"I won't be held responsible, even if you die," he said.

"I know, sir."

So it was that Beghura went to the east with this teacher. They evangelized as they went, so progress was slow. It took them a full year to cross through Shaoh and finally arrive in Li. Moving through Li, however, turned out to be even more challenging.

Along the way, the teacher received scriptures written in all kinds of languages. "Attend to the words," he told her. "Remember them. Learn every line, every letter. It might save your life one day."

The teacher could be brusque, but he looked after her well. He was not by nature a patient man, however, and more than once they found themselves chased by angry crowds of nonbelievers—so that was annoying. Sometimes they were even locked up and subjected to what amounted to torture.

"Accursed unbelievers! I will hold your sins against you until the day you repent and believe!"

Ah, yes. The teacher was very fond of saying that.

It was unclear to Beghura exactly what series of events had driven this man to choose heretic-ridden Li as his mission field, but it also didn't matter to her.

Although their group had come from a church, they didn't treat their child servant especially well. Fair enough; they didn't have much money to spare. At those times, Beghura would remind herself of who she was: not the daughter of a rich merchant. Just a little beggar brat and a servant.

Instead, she used all her wits to put food in her mouth. If she spotted a particularly kind-looking woman in town, she might start weeping nearby, which would sometimes earn her some alms. Sometimes she met kids who would share their snacks with her if she clowned around and made them laugh. Sometimes free food would be put out at celebrations; then, Beghura would eat as much as she could to make up for the times when she wouldn't be able to eat, and if she spotted something that would keep well, she would quietly abscond with it.

One time, when they happened to be traveling with a party of itinerant performers, she learned sleight of hand. She discovered that if she watched the artists practice too openly, they would beat her, so instead she climbed a nearby tree and spied on them. She was aware that if she could perform these tricks for rich folk, they might spare her a few coins.

The teacher was always angry when he discovered her at these tricks—but he must have felt bad that he couldn't reliably feed her, for he never took the snacks and small coins she had earned.

After they had been in Li a while, Beghura changed her name to Maachue. She would have a better chance of surviving, the teacher told her, if she pretended to be Linese herself.

"I'm told you're going to the western capital," he said.

"Yes, sir."

The teacher and the rest of the group would be staying in a

village that had one of Li's largest churches. It would be the perfect base, they said, from which to spread their teachings.

"You want me to come with you?" Beghura and the teacher had been together for several years now, and he had a certain respect for her.

"I'll be all right, thank you."

Beghura was fully twelve years old now—going on marriageable age in Li. Ordinarily, one might consider her traveling alone to be a dangerous idea. However, Beghura had cut her hair short, and her small eyes and crimped nose were hardly beautiful. She joined a caravan to the western capital as a handmaid.

By the time they arrived, the year had turned, and Beghura was thirteen. She parted ways with the caravan and began living as a street urchin.

Playing the clown turned out to suit Beghura's personality. During the day she would fool around and show off her sleight of hand to earn small change; at night, she slept in an irrigation ditch to shield herself from the cold. She had been living that way for some time when she began to hear talk of a woman who resembled her mother's portrait.

"I'm sure I saw her at the biggest house in the city. Admittedly, it was only the one time..." someone informed her.

Choosing to trust those words, Beghura made her way to the looming mansion.

It was, indeed, the biggest residence in the western capital, and they were not interested in admitting a filthy wretch like Beghura. So instead, she waited for someone to come out of the house.

"Big Brother! Hold it right there!" she heard somebody cry.

A well-built man stepped out of the gate. Well, only just a man—barely a few years past his coming-of-age ceremony. He was, however, wearing much nicer clothes than Beghura. His crisp eyebrows no doubt made him popular with the young ladies.

He was followed by a girl—presumably the owner of the voice Beghura had heard. She was of marriageable age herself, and she was very beautiful in spite of the piercing look in her eye. The ample fabric of her outfit was silk, the very kind that had passed through Beghura's father's hands so long ago. It had been so many years since she'd touched silk, with its distinctive sheen.

"Come back here this instant! Our older brother is kind enough to be your bodyguard. You need to apologize! Argh! He would

never do it if Grandfather hadn't personally asked him."

Following the imposing young woman came another, younger lady, with striking red hair and emerald eyes. Unlike the first girl, in her eyes there was kindness. Beghura thought this second girl was about her own age—so how could they be so different? One was a dirty street urchin, the other might as well have been a beautiful princess.

Then, Beghura heard another voice: "Yin, that's quite enough!"

She hadn't heard that voice in years—and yet it dredged up scenes that she thought had been lost in the abyss of her memories.

"Lady You is going to the rear palace. Think of her station!"

A woman appeared—a beautiful woman, slim and tall with skin the color of an elephant's tusk and a body that was all flowing curves.

The girl called Yin began to pout. Beghura, however, could not have cared less. She stood there flummoxed, wondering how this beauty who was supposed to have been with her all her life could be here, now.

"Yes, *Mother*," Yin said.

Mother. Beghura recoiled. She knew that word; she'd been learning the language of Li for years now, and that was unquestionably what it meant. What she didn't know was why this foreign girl was using it.

She'd heard that her mother had had a husband and child before she met Beghura's father, but they were supposed to have died in the shipwreck—weren't they?

There was yet another voice. "Mommy!" It was a child, younger than Beghura. Not even ten years old. "I wanna go too!"

"Hardly. You and I are going to stay here and study. You can go shopping next time."

"Aww!"

The child clung to Beghura's mother's leg, just the way Beghura herself had once done.

Beghura could hardly process what she was seeing, but one fact she could not escape was that all the children surrounding her mother were far cleaner and lovelier than her. Beghura had only a fuzz on her head, her hair crudely shaved with a razor, and she had been wearing the same clothes for years now. Without the money to pay for an inn, it had been many days since her last bath and she was caked in dust. A filthy street child, and nothing more.

Without thinking of what she was doing, Beghura popped out from behind the wall where she had been hiding. She took one step, then another, toward her mother.

"Hey, there's something...filthy over there," the girl called Yin said. She had the look of someone who had spotted a bit of rubbish. Not something with no value—for it was not a question of value—but something the very existence of which was intolerable. Beghura remembered how her father used to look when somebody brought him a piece of real junk and asked him what it was worth.

"Don't bother yourself with the likes of that, Yin," the man said.

Beghura was unsure what nuance the man intended with "don't bother." She was fixated on the beautiful woman.

Like Yin, the woman spared Beghura only a glance, then collected the boy and trundled him back inside as if nothing had happened.

Beghura was at a loss what to do. On some level, she had been following her mother all this time, convinced that when they saw each other, her mother would somehow know who she was.

But no. There hadn't been so much as a spark of recognition.

Why had Beghura spent all those years in pursuit of her mother? Was it so she could have a joyous reunion of parent and child? No.

She'd just wanted to know what value she held in her mother's eyes.

That night, Beghura sneaked into the mansion. She had to know. She had to find out what she was to her mother.

She found it a simple matter to infiltrate the house—maybe it was all those years of fleeing mobs of nonbelievers. She moved stealthily from room to room, trying to pinpoint where her mother was.

A voice came from right behind her. "I thought I smelled a rat."

Panicked, Beghura tried to turn around, but she was pinned before she could move.

"A street urchin, come to do a little burgling? You're going to leave with two less arms than you came in with."

The speaker was a man, maybe thirty years old, although Beghura couldn't turn far enough to get a good look at him.

"I'm no burglar," Beghura said as politely as she could. It was just what the teacher had told her to do—unfortunately, it backfired.

“You’re an outlander, aren’t you! I can hear it in your voice.” Beghura found her face shoved hard against the floor. Then the man dragged her somewhere no one would see them. “You’re still young. Where are you from? Shaoh? No... Farther west. What did you come here for?”

“My... My mother,” Beghura gasped out. “I came to meet...my mother!”

“Your *mother*? A filthy little guttersnipe like you has a mother working in a house like this?” He gave a mocking laugh. Let him insult her; Beghura didn’t care. Instead, she pulled the ragged, weathered portrait from the folds of her robes.

“What’s this?” the man said, and he sounded different from before. There was a hint of confusion in his voice now. She felt his grip relax ever so slightly. “You’re *her* kid?”

Beghura didn’t know who he meant. She knew, however, that the man’s moment of confusion offered her one chance. Escape would not be easy. Her chosen method of exploiting the opening?

“Fourteen years ago, my mother was in a shipwreck and was saved by my father. I’m her daughter, born to her after their marriage.”

Tell him the unvarnished truth.

“Her daughter! Hah! Ha ha... Yeah, yeah! That makes sense. There *was* supposed to be a daughter.” The man laughed again. “One she abandoned because she didn’t need her anymore.”

The words rang in Beghura’s ears. “Didn’t need...?”

“That’s right. Didn’t need her a bit. Why should she, if she was coming back here? You? You had one purpose: to legitimize her while she was undercover in a foreign nation. That’s all the value you ever had.”

Had. Past tense. She really didn’t need Beghura anymore.

“She couldn’t exactly bring you home with her, could she? She had to do her job, and you were dead weight.”

“Dead weight...” Her head pounded as if she’d been struck.

She’d known, of course. She’d known from the moment her mother had disappeared, leaving Beghura and her father behind.

“So what happened to your old man? Big-name merchant like him probably got himself another wife no problem, eh?”

If only he had. If only her father had been such a man. But no: he had been kind, and a fool.

“When he heard my mother might be in Li, he left to go find

her, and died on the journey. His household collapsed. I was left with nothing, so I came after my mother."

"With only that portrait?"

"That's right."

"Hm."

The man looked like he was thinking about something. He gave Beghura an appraising glance. She had a thought: here, at this moment, he was trying to decide what she was worth. If the answer was *nothing*, then he would dispose of her like something worthless.

"I'm fluent in my mother tongue as well as Linese and Shaohnese," Beghura said. "And I speak several other languages as well."

Calling to mind the scriptures the teacher had given her, she began reciting in a series of foreign languages.

"I know my numbers too. I can go for a week on nothing but water. I can take pain, and I have quick hands." She showed him a bit of the sleight of hand that she'd learned watching those performers.

She would do anything. To survive, to find some value in her existence.

"What a fool. *This* is the one with all the tricks," the man muttered. "All right. I'll give you a reprieve. Let's see what you're capable of. Show me you've got some value..." Here he smiled, a sort of leer. "...and I'll make you my successor."

So the man became Beghura's mentor.

Chapter 26: Man and Wife

When Baryou was sixteen, he was summoned by his mother Taomei. “What I’m about to say to you, you *must* commit to memory,” she said.

His mother ran the Ma clan. The clan’s purpose was to protect the Imperial family—which was another way of saying that its men put their lives on the line, and sometimes they died. Thus, a woman was always left behind, so that whatever else happened, the brains of the clan might remain.

Normally, the wife of the family chieftain would fulfill that role. Due to exceptional circumstances, however, Baryou’s father Gaoshun would not become head of the family. Yet nonetheless, because there was no one else who was qualified, the role fell to Baryou’s mother.

Taomei proceeded to tell Baryou about another of the named clans, the Mi, or “Snake,” clan. Outwardly, it was the Ma who protected the Imperial family. But in secret matters, it was the Mi who looked after Imperial interests.

“Although we refer to them as a clan, the Mi are not constituted by simple blood ties, like we are.”

The Mi were experts at gathering intelligence. For exactly that reason, however, they never identified themselves publicly.

“And although we refer to them as a single clan, the Mi are many, each having what you can think of as a hereditary system.”

“Hereditary, mother? Meaning what?”

“The Mi... How do I explain this? I know. Say there were ten of them. Each of those ten would pick one person to be their successor. Often they choose family members, but if there’s no one quite right for the job, they sometimes turn to outside sources. Those successors constitute the next generation of the clan. Moreover, those not chosen to succeed are no longer considered part of the clan, and are very rarely taught its secrets. In fact, they may well not even know that their relatives *are* part of the Mi clan.”

“Mother, may I ask a question?”

“Yes, what?”

“What you are telling me is that the Mi clan could just as easily insinuate itself into one of the other named clans, is it not?”

Taomei smirked: it was clear that Baryou had hit the nail on the head. “Precisely. This is the most important thing of all. The Mi clan is the twin of the Ma, and as such, only I and a small handful of others know about it.”

Baryou began to feel an unpleasant gurgling in his stomach. A clan specialized in spying? Yes, that would certainly be appropriate for finding out what subjects and advisors were thinking.

“Another question, if I may?”

“Yes?”

“This woman who is to be my wife—would she, perchance, be a member of the Mi clan?”

The offer had come via his older sister Maamei a few days before. It couldn’t be coincidence that his mother had chosen this moment to speak to him of this matter.

“That, I don’t know. But understand this: this is a match you can’t refuse.”

Taomei spoke firmly, and her retiring son was not about to talk back.

The woman arrived several days later, and Baryou found he couldn’t make heads or tails of her.

“Hullo! Maachue’s the name! But you can just call me Miss Chue!”

She was certainly enthusiastic, Baryou observed. Almost the polar opposite of him.

“Miss Chue, you’re standing extremely close…but, well, you seem to be that sort of person, so I suppose we’d best get used to it. Anyway, Miss Chue, this is my little brother Baryou. He has a tendency to faint periodically, but you can simply call one of the menservants to carry him to his bedroom.”

“Roger that!”

Chue dashed off a bow to Maamei, then trotted over to Baryou. In a panic, he tried to tuck himself into a corner of the room, but found Chue was already behind him.

She whispered in his ear: “Ooh hoo hoo! Think you can run? How very naive. But then, Miss Chue doesn’t dislike that kind of person.”

“Eeyikes!” Baryou cried and promptly fainted.

His first impression of Chue was that she had no sense of personal space and that he was never going to survive with her.

“Hellooo! Miss Chue is here!” Chue drawled. “I made a nice cotton jacket for you—try it on!”

“Hiii! I made some bean buns. Oops, you’re studying? Well, eat them while they’re hot!”

“I got this bamboo screen for you so it will be easier for you to talk! If we put this between us, can we have a conversation?”

Chue seemed to be visiting Baryou all the time, and about virtually anything. Just when he thought maybe she was simply a loud person, she brought him bean buns while he was studying for the civil service exam; no sooner did she seem to be too close than he found her at a carefully measured distance.

This young woman, Chue, was indeed somewhat noisy—but also highly capable. Each batch of bean buns was a little closer to the size and flavor Baryou preferred. His cotton jackets always seemed perfectly suited to the season and fitted to his body. And the bamboo screen? Honestly, it was a huge help.

“Hoo hoo hoo! Oh, Miss Chue, you’re so useful!” Chue said.

“Does one normally say that of themselves?” Baryou mused from behind his screen. He didn’t remember how long it had been since they’d started talking through the bamboo divider. Not being able to see the other person’s face made him so much more comfortable.

He went on, “I can’t say I think you gain much by marrying me. To be perfectly frank with you, my younger brother is going to inherit the clan. Even if you and I had children, they might well simply be adopted by him, with no special regard for you. I suppose my older sister might raise them.”

How many years had it been since he’d spoken for so long with someone other than a blood relative?

“Adopt them? So Miss Chue wouldn’t have to do any child-rearing! Well, that sounds like the best of all worlds!”

“That’s what interests you here?”

Baryou couldn’t believe his ears. They were talking about what would happen when the children were born, but there remained the looming question of whether they could produce any to begin with. Just thinking about it made him flush red.

“If Miss Maamei brings them up, I’m sure she’ll do a good job. It’s certainly safer than having *me* raise them! Miss Chue expects to be a very hardworking woman.”

He didn’t think she was simply putting on a brave front—she really meant that.

Baryou thought back to what his mother had said. If Chue was a member of the Mi clan, she might take her child as her successor. In which case, letting Maamei raise and educate the child would be very appropriate.

Baryou was a weak person. He didn’t have it in him to go against somebody. So when a match had come to him, he’d really had no choice but to accept it, even if it was purely a strategic marriage.

“What do you say, Baryou? Am I a little bit helpful?”

“Certainly, in your way.”

He had started to become accustomed to this unusual woman, just the slightest bit.

“May I douse the light? Don’t worry, I know what I’m doing.”

Perhaps those words left something to be desired as a sweet nothing on their first night together. The bit about the light, sure—but the rest? Wasn’t that the kind of thing the man usually said?

Then again, Baryou, with his near-pathological mistrust of other people, had never and would never have practiced elsewhere so as to ensure he’d make no mistakes on his first night. Even worse, he had to let his partner do absolutely everything, a most dishonorable situation for a man.

“It doesn’t tickle, does it?”

“Of course it does,” he grumbled.

His wife gave a giggle that sounded much like the twittering of the sparrow she was named for—Baryou could never say no to that.

“You have such nice, smooth skin. I’m downright jealous!” Chue drawled, but somehow she sounded more sultry than usual.

Baryou did the only thing he could do: he closed his eyes.

Even after the child was born, Chue was still Chue.

“It really is just like a monkey, isn’t it? Everyone says it takes after you, Baryou, but I’m not sure how they can tell. Hoo boy, did giving birth tire me out, though! It was probably the third most painful thing that’s ever happened to me. You can handle the next

one, Baryou."

"I keep telling you, that's not how it works..."

Baryou had eventually reached a point where he could talk to her without the screen between them, and now he accepted the snotty, red-faced infant from Chue.

"Don't be shy of your own baby, okay?" she said.

"Now, that's just rude."

In point of fact, he found it difficult to hold the child, which flopped around as if it had no bones. Baryou grew uneasy and was about to give it back to Chue, but she rebuffed him.

"I don't want it anymore. What if I held it for too long and it remembered my face or something?"

"Are those the words of a mother? Anyway, it hasn't even opened its eyes yet."

"Miss Chue is not going to raise it. That was the deal, wasn't it?"

After not very long at all, Chue said she had some work to do and left the house.

By that point, Baryou was already convinced that she was indeed a member of the Mi clan. Often, he recalled, members of the clan didn't even know of each other's existence. They simply followed and obeyed their respective Imperial family members, and that was what gave them their hierarchy. To gain greater rank was an honor within the clan, one that also applied to successors.

Chue, too, would one day choose someone to follow in her footsteps. Baryou decided to assume, or at least pretend, that distancing herself from her child was, in its own way, an expression of a mother's love.

Chue was always a lively presence, never quiet except perhaps for when she ate and when she slept. Then again, was she really sleeping when she was sleeping?

That was the Chue he remembered. Now here she was, covered from head to toe in bandages and lying in bed.

He'd been told that on her way back to the western capital, Chue had been in a battle with a bandit, and that was when she had received these injuries. Normally, the best thing might have been to let her lie quietly and not move her, but her work didn't allow that. After the surgery was over, they'd loaded his battered wife into the wagon and carted her home.

Council had been in session when Chue got back to the main house, so Baryou didn't hear about her until afterward. Just moments ago, in fact.

There was a young woman sitting by the bedside, an apothecary. It was Maomao.

"Oh!" they both said.

Baryou wasn't sure how to follow that up. He'd hardly ever met Maomao face-to-face. Usually there was at least a screen or curtain between them.

It was Maomao who broke the silence. "Chue is very badly hurt. Please, don't overstress her if you can avoid it."

Maomao hardly looked like she was in a much better state: her own face was covered with scratches. She must have fought as hard as she could to treat Chue. Baryou could only bow his head.

He understood Chue had let this happen to herself on account of her work. He didn't know what that work was. All he knew was that there was nothing he could do.

Almost absently, he brushed her undamaged hand, the left one. The fingers were cold.

"Mmr..." Chue mumbled. Baryou almost jumped.

His wife's eyes drifted open. They looked puffy, maybe from sleeping for so long.

"Well... It's my husband," she drawled. "You look ready to keel over and die."

"I daresay that's my line."

"Hoo hoo hoo. I made a little boo-boo. Shouldn't have been so soft..."

Baryou felt better just hearing her voice. At the same time, he couldn't help noticing how thin and frail she sounded.

"Question...okay?" she said.

"Yes, what?"

"You know, I... I won't be able to move as well as I could before. What do we do?"

I. She'd said *I*, not *Miss Chue*.

"You think maybe I'm all washed up? No more use? Maybe you should go ahead and divorce me?"

The sudden mention of divorce brought Baryou up short. "You're asking me what to do?"

"That right hand isn't going to be any use to anyone," Chue said, drawling again.

Yes, it would certainly make some daily tasks harder. But then again...

"Aren't you ambidextrous, Chue?"

Baryou knew: he'd seen her wield chopsticks perfectly well in both hands. Plus there were all those flags and flowers and doves, which she produced as capably with the left hand as the right.

"You were always ten times as agile as I am," he said. "With just one hand, you'll still be five times as quick."

In the time it took Baryou to roll one bean bun, Chue could make ten.

"My! Hoo hoo hoo. You've scored a point on Miss Chue. Three times is probably the limit, if you ask me—hoo hoo hoo!"

"Don't laugh. You'll aggravate your stomach injuries," Baryou said, slightly frantic.

"Fwoo hee hee! How very rude."

"I see your injuries haven't stopped you from chattering as much as ever. Or did you take a blow to the head that knocked all the foreign languages out of it?"

"Nope. I still remember them, I think." Oddly enough, Chue seemed to be enjoying this.

"Then there's nothing to worry about, is there?"

"That's a fair point. All right, then, perhaps the very helpful Miss Chue could make one request of you?"

"What is it?"

"You see, Miss Chue is *very* hungry..."

At that moment, her stomach gurgled mightily.

"Listen, you..."

When, he wondered, had they started to share such familiar conversation?

It would certainly be a great deal of trouble to fill the gulf between himself and a new wife one little bit at a time.

He'd done it once, and that was enough for him.

Chapter 27: Master and Pupil

"All right. Well, don't force yourself to eat too much."

Once Baryou was sure that Chue had eaten her food, he left. He'd stuck around during the meal, maybe in case he could help with something, but Chue had so little trouble using the chopsticks with her left hand that he could only sit and watch. Chue thought maybe she should have looked a little less capable, even if it would worry him, but packing food into her empty stomach had taken priority.

After she ate, she wanted to sleep. Those were the basics of getting better—but when you had a visitor, well, you had to postpone the sleep.

Chue slowly opened her eyes. Her arm might have been all but torn off and her stomach might have been nearly battered to a pulp, but as far as she was concerned, her instinct was as sharp as ever.

A man, about forty years old, stood there in the gloom. Lu, Vice Minister of the Board of Rites.

"What's up?" Chue said. "I know you're not here just to ask if I'm feeling better. You probably came to scold an incompetent pupil."

"Have you stopped paying attention? I can hear your accent."

"Oopsie! Pardon me very much," Chue said in a pointed drawl.

She couldn't sit up. She had at least one broken rib, she gathered; they had braced it. It had been a challenge when she was eating, but she'd lived with it.

"My right hand is pretty useless now. But I've still got a perfectly good left one!"

"I have no use for *compromised* competence."

"Then, do I have no value anymore?" Chue's face crumpled. Apparently, being three times as agile as Baryou was too much reduced. "Are you going to pick a new successor, Mentor?"

"Do you realize how long it would take me to find and raise one at this point?"

"Oh, certainly I do. Even someone of my abilities would need at

least five years. No matter how talented they were, we'd be talking at least a decade total. Hard times!"

"I didn't put all that effort into you so that you could be the crest of a human wave. His Majesty is more invested in your interpreting than anything else."

"I'm very glad to hear that. But I won't be able to do my cute little performances anymore, and that's a problem! Maybe I could learn some entertaining stories?"

She'd have to start collecting jokes, like the ones Maomao told.

"Am I not going to be disposed of?"

"I *can't* dispose of you. That's my whole problem."

"I'm very sorry about that!" Drawl, drawl.

"I want you to find a successor candidate. One even more distinguished than you are."

"Distinguished, you say?"

Just for a second, Chue thought of Xiaohong. She was more than suited to the role, but it would be hard to pry her away.

"Well, in good time." Chue grinned.

It was Vice Minister Lu who had drawn Chue into the Mi clan. Publicly, he was second-in-command at the Board of Rites. It was rare for a member of the clan to rise so high in the world—they preferred less conspicuous roles that provided greater freedom of action. However, the death of Vice Minister Lu's older brother had resulted in him succeeding to his family's headship.

When Vice Minister Lu had gone to the Imperial capital, Chue had followed him. That was where she had met Maamei and ultimately married Baryou. The marriage had not been her free choice. It had been strongly influenced by the purposes of Vice Minister Lu and the Ma clan.

That wasn't such a bad thing, Chue thought, so long as she had value. Baryou was a decent person too; in fact, Chue thought he was quite a good husband.

Most people would probably not have been so happy to find themselves living and serving in a land so far from the country of their birth. Chue, however, had the talent and wherewithal to make an even better member of the Mi clan than her mother had. As her value rose, as her value was recognized, it would be shown in the form of rank.

Her mother had been part of the Mi clan. Sent to be His Majesty's eyes in the western lands, her beauty had made her

Gyoku-ou's wife.

"But that's all the woman was." So Vice Minister Lu had told Chue in that mansion in the western capital so long ago. "Just a trophy, fit to be fussed over. Eyes she might have been, but she was never given any great task, and her rank within the clan is low."

So she had rushed to achieve results. She'd gone to Shaoh, claiming it was for business—but those of compromised competence were...well. She'd screwed up, but just when it seemed her identity was about to be revealed there in Shaoh, she was in a very convenient shipwreck. She decided to infiltrate yet another country until things had cooled down a bit.

During her stay, Chue was born.

Deep down, Chue's mother was something like what one might call a con artist. She did truly love Chue's father as his wife, but when the job was over, she cut them loose. Chue and her father both.

The information about Chue's father's business contacts, she'd presumably taken as a bargaining chip to get back into Li. It was Vice Minister Lu's own mentor who had aided her in her escape.

When Chue's mother got back to the western capital, she pretended to have no memory of Chue or her father. She reunited with her husband and three children, and even gave birth to another child.

Gyoku-ou's subsequent destruction of the Yi clan, however, probably owed something to her mother's lack of ability. She wasn't able to do what the Mi clan should have done, squeezing like a snake from the inside until he couldn't move.

As a Mi clan member, she was simply too compromised. Chue's mother knew that perfectly well. Instead, she endeavored to choose a distinguished successor.

It was too late for her three children, who had been poisoned by Gyoku-ou while she was away. That was why she decided to make that last child: Hulan, Gyoku-ou's third son. She would raise him as befitted someone whose name meant "tiger and wolf," and use him to remake the western capital according to her own designs.

The simplest way to do that seemed to be to expel Gyoku-ou's recalcitrant eldest son and make Hulan the assistant to the much more pliable second boy. It was almost impossible to predict what might happen to the family if the eldest son ascended to the

headship—but the second eldest? With him, they might be able to hope for some stability.

There was another possibility: maybe someone else, someone not of the Gyoku family, could be put in place in the western capital. The thought occurred to her. But then the eldest son learned Hulan's secret. Learned what he was planning.

"That Master Shikyou sure is an interesting guy, huh? Who would have expected him to *volunteer* to be part of the Mi clan?"

Anyone could see he was hardly suited for covert operations. Maybe he'd given them the name Shikyou to demonstrate his commitment to joining the clan, but Chue found it almost comically misguided. If changing your name was enough to change your station in life, they could have made all the disposable Mi clan folk they needed.

Now that even Shikyou knew she was a member of the Mi clan, the esteem in which Chue's less-than-competent mother was held was not likely to rise.

"I wonder how low Miss Chue's rank will fall?"

"Not lower than *hers*."

"No, I suppose not." Chue smiled. Her mother had decided that Chue had no value—what would she think if that valueless thing stood forever above her?

Personally, Chue didn't really care anymore—but her father had died without knowing the truth. For his sake, surely she could be permitted this much. Chue must make certain that she was forever valued better than her mother, so that the woman would never forget her—or her father.

It was for that modicum of vengeance that Chue had sworn fealty to the nation called Li.

"Mentor, will there be any change in Miss Chue's work?"

"I doubt it."

"That's good to know."

"It's not very easy work to grasp. Do you understand what it means?" Her mentor's expression was clouded.

"Yes, sir. The first and foremost mission I've been given is to make the Moon Prince happy."

"I don't understand what that means."

Neither did Chue. Finding someone, she knew how to do. Eliminating them—easy enough. But this?

Nonetheless, she believed she had made the right choice

protecting Maomao, even at the cost of her hand.

"Sigh! I do hope Miss Maomao will heed Miss Chue's advice!"

Her mentor gave her a strange look at that, but she pretended not to notice.

Chapter 28: Sound Sleep

Maomao was trying to work her way back from Chue's bedroom to the medical office, but she was swaying on her feet.

I'm so...so tired.

She was fatigued beyond measure now. It had been nothing but trouble ever since she had helped Shikyou. First she'd been confined, then taken on a headlong flight from she knew not whom, to she knew not where. She'd been captured by bandits, put to forced servitude, and then attacked on the way home.

Chue's surgery had been a nightmare. The good news was that although at least one of her ribs was cracked, none of them was completely broken. There didn't appear to be any damage to her internal organs, either, but she'd taken some very serious blows, so Maomao had made sure to brace the area anyway. No severe injuries to her torso meant she probably wasn't in danger of her life.

Her right arm, though—that was going to be a problem. It was in a sorry state; there was no way around it. It was still shaped like an arm, more or less, but that was the extent of the good news. Everything below the elbow was a mess, the bones shattered and the flesh all but shredded.

Chue was a perfectly skilled bodyguard, Maomao thought, but that night, she'd simply been at a disadvantage. Bear-Man hadn't been thinking; he was all pain and rage, and it had given him the nigh-unkillable tenacity of a viper. She'd fought a wounded beast, and this was the result.

Maomao had set the bits of bone back where they belonged, sewn the sinews together, and stitched the torn flesh. It had barely passed for surgery; more like a live experiment, trial and error on the spot. There'd been no anesthetic available—she'd had Chue bite down on a handkerchief. Maomao had had someone hold the arm down, yet Chue had hardly flinched throughout the procedure. Just how much pain could she take?

Normally, Maomao would have prescribed extensive rest for a patient in Chue's condition, but they couldn't keep camping out.

Better to get back to the western capital as fast as they could, and that was exactly what they did. They had arrived not too long ago at all.

Maomao's prognosis was that Chue's right arm was going to be virtually useless. It would probably have almost no feeling, at least from the elbow down. The most Maomao could do for her was to watch the arm's progress and make sure that it didn't rot off.

I wonder if the muscles will reattach.

She'd tried to stitch them together as best she could. If she'd done a decent job, then Chue might—Maomao liked to think—get some sensation back in her hand, but everything Maomao had done during the surgery had been only her attempt to imitate things she'd seen her father Luomen do. She hadn't learned any of this stuff doing dissections with the doctors.

She'd done what she could. Continuing to sit by Chue's side wouldn't accomplish anything. She'd left Baryou to look after his wife, with instructions to call her if anything happened.

Ugh. I'm so tired, and I ache everywhere.

She hadn't had a wink of sleep since the attack. It was rough, but when she thought of all the people who had it much worse at that moment, she couldn't rest. Still, working herself ragged for that reason wasn't going to help anybody.

I'm going to sleep! I swear I'm going to sleep!

She was going to go to the medical office and...wait. Why were her feet taking her the other direction?

What was going on?

This is Miss Chue's fault.

Her and her mumbling, like she was leaving Maomao with her last words.

Under any other circumstances, Maomao would have said that conserving her stamina was the most important thing at that moment.

Instead, she headed for Jinshi's office.

Maomao didn't normally come to this room without a summons from Chue or someone, and she found it required more courage than she'd expected to knock on the door. She took a deep breath in, then let it out, then knocked.

She waited. There was no answer.

She gave the door a curious look. Maybe no one was home. She

felt a bit like the wind had been taken out of her sails, but anyway, she turned to go back to the medical office.

At exactly that moment, the door burst open. Maomao turned back in surprise to find Jinshi standing there.

He looked haggard. Maybe he was pulling yet another all-nighter—overestimating how much his body could take, again. How many days had it been since he'd slept? The sight of him might have inspired pity in some people, but to Maomao he just looked like a man who had overworked himself. His eyes were puffy, his skin dry. His hair lacked luster and his lips were chapped.

"How many all-nighters have you pulled?" Maomao said.

"I could ask you the very same question!"

There seemed to be something Jinshi wished he could say, for he reached out. He caught Maomao's hand and drew her into the office. He pulled so hard that she thought she might tumble right onto the floor, but he caught her first.

Oh!

They lay on the floor, Maomao on top, Jinshi underneath. There was a nice, thick carpet to land on, but even so, Maomao wondered if it didn't hurt falling down like that.

After a moment, Jinshi said, "Don't go running off like that again."

"I'm very sorry."

"Try to *think* before you act!"

"I did think. And look what happened."

She felt a warm breath on her head and knew he was sighing.

She couldn't move. She tried to look up at Jinshi, but found his chin was in the way.

"I brought you here because I thought it would be safe. How could everything have gone so wrong?"

"Because things don't always go the way we plan. If I'd stayed in the capital, the same sort of thing might have happened."

"True enough."

Why were they lying there on the floor, trading what amounted to banter?

We should at least close the door. What if somebody saw them? *I've got to get up.*

How long did he plan to lie there holding her? To be perfectly blunt, she hadn't bathed in days. She'd hardly even changed her clothes. It must have smelled gross, lying there with a woman

covered in sweat and dust.

What the hell? He's actually taking a whiff!

"Master Jinshi?"

"What?"

"Maybe you could let me go one of these days?"

"You could always push me away yourself."

Maomao took Jinshi's hand. It felt very heavy, but he wasn't specifically pushing on her. It was just...

I'm sleepy.

Maomao could hardly think straight. Maybe it was the release of all that tension, but she felt oddly safe. Was it the thick carpet that felt so nice? Or was it the warmth of another body right next to her?

"True enough..."

She tried to brush his hand away, but couldn't. Instead, her breathing gradually evened out, and slowly, so did his.

What do I do here?

Her eyelids were trying to close, but she felt like there was something she had to tell him.

"I know you have your circumstances, Miss Maomao. It's important not to get carried away by your emotions!"

I'm not getting carried away by my emotions, she thought.

She looked at the face of the beautiful man before her. With his almond-shaped eyes closed, the lashes that fringed them looked even longer than usual. His facial features were perfectly formed, his lips neither too full nor too thin. There was the scar running along his right cheek.

For someone with such a pretty face, he was surprisingly well-built. That accursed brand was still on his flank.

Maomao couldn't comprehend it. To get what he wanted, Jinshi had tried to remove himself from a position at the very zenith of power. If his goal was indeed Maomao herself, then she could only think there was something wrong with him.

It was a heat like molten metal. She wasn't sure what to do with it all—for the temperature she could return was no more than that of lukewarm water.

Slowly she reached up toward Jinshi's cheek and pressed her tepid warmth against it. It felt a little cooler than her hand. His eyes were completely closed, and he nuzzled against her hand like a kitten being petted. He was asleep—perhaps he had finally relaxed.

There's nothing I can give him back in return.

Maomao brought her face close to Jinshi's. His breath and hers mingled. His lips were even colder than his cheek.

A short while later, Maomao's breathing, too, took on the even rhythm of sleep, and she slept soundly for the first time in more days than she could remember.

Chapter 29: The Compromise

Jinshi's first good sleep in days went a long way toward restoring his energy.

He looked at the bed, where Maomao was curled up, caked with dust and blood. She had been so tired that she hadn't woken up even when Jinshi had picked her up and set her on the bed.

It killed Jinshi to realize he had fallen asleep before her; Maomao must have been through far worse things than he had. He wished he could have gotten her tucked into bed sooner, with a nice, soft blanket around her.

She hadn't been able to resist her first sleep in days, and she looked as comfortable as if she were in a pleasant bath.

On Maomao's cheek, Jinshi could see a spot where it looked like she'd been struck. The rest of her was covered in scratches, and there was even a blade mark on her neck. He gathered that her blood-soaked clothes were from treating the badly injured Chue.

"You look awful," he murmured.

Jinshi suspected that if he asked Maomao what had happened to her since he had seen her last, she would give him only the most businesslike report. There would be no attempt to make him worry for her or sympathize with her. None of the unctuousness with which the ladies of the rear palace used to approach him. Did she do that so that she wouldn't be a burden to him? Or simply because she saw no point in getting emotional about it?

If the former, then Jinshi wouldn't be content until he had done something about this infuriating, catlike creature.

Since he had stopped taking the medicine that allowed him to pass for a eunuch, he had fully regained his male functions. Did she realize he would be nothing but a beast if the cold chains of rationality hadn't bound him?

"Young master?" called his attendant, Suiren. She came in bearing a change of clothes. "It's almost time. You need to have your food."

"I know, I know."

“What about a bath?”

Jinshi considered. “I think I’ll pass. Not enough time, is there?”

“Some might say it’s not very sanitary to leave yourself covered in blood.”

Despite her little quip, Suiren was smiling more than usual, Jinshi thought. “Shall I at least prepare some hot water?” she asked.

Her gaze had alighted on the bed. Even if Jinshi didn’t want to wash, he should probably allow Maomao to do so.

“Yes,” he said. “And a change of clothes too.” His clever attendant would know exactly whose clothes he was referring to.

“Certainly.” Suiren gave a respectful bow of her head.

Jinshi stretched mightily, then went over and stood by the bed once again. He leaned close, but was careful not to disturb Maomao, who was deep in sleep.

“Perhaps I might charge myself up just this much?” he said, almost to himself, and then he gently brushed his lips against Maomao’s cheek.

Once he had changed and eaten, he headed for the great hall of the main house. Located in a separate building, he was given to understand that it was often used for banquets—but today it hosted only a minimum of people and their bodyguards. Every care was being taken that they not be overheard.

Gaoshun and Taomei accompanied Jinshi. For once, Taomei was present not as one of his ladies-in-waiting, but as his aide-de-camp. It felt slightly odd, having a husband-and-wife pair flanking him, but having the two of them with him was the most reassuring thing he could have hoped for at that moment.

When he entered the hall, he found he was not the first to arrive. The people who were already there were seated in chairs around a table.

One of them was a boorish man who looked very much like the one who had taken them all for such a ride, Gyoku-ou. He lacked Gyoku-ou’s facial hair, however. He was trying to remain expressionless, but couldn’t keep a slight furrow out of his brow. This was Gyoku-ou’s oldest son, Shikyou. Jinshi had hardly talked with the man, but had observed him closely throughout the discussion about the inheritance. He’d found as many points of dissimilarity from Gyoku-ou as he had points of resemblance.

Sitting across from Shikyou was a younger man—in fact, he

looked barely old enough to have had his coming-of-age ceremony: Hulan, the one who had been learning his craft under Jinshi's tutelage. He looked nothing like his brother Shikyou. Humble of attitude and so small Jinshi could almost believe he still had another growth spurt to go through, at the moment he looked...unusual. He was covered in bandages. That's what happened when you threw yourself into a fire. They'd doused him immediately, so the burns weren't as severe as they could have been, but it still looked painful.

There was one more person present as well. Normally, with the eldest and youngest sons in attendance, one might have expected that person to be the second son—but today, one would be wrong.

Instead, sitting there smiling with her arm in a sling, was Chue.

Her face was covered in cuts, and they must have done something to her torso as well, because the way she wore her robe looked awfully stiff. She had a cotton jacket around her shoulders to keep her from getting cold. Jinshi recognized it as the cotton jacket Baryou often wore, although Chue's husband wasn't there.

"Moon Prince! Long time no see," Chue drawled. She sounded so perfectly ordinary that Jinshi wondered for a second if she was actually hurt, but then he remembered the blood that had spattered Maomao's outfit, and knew how serious her wounds must have been. She could hardly have enough blood left. She might act insouciant, but her survivability was something else.

"Pardon me very much," Chue said, "but may I remain seated?" She was glancing at Taomei for confirmation, worried about how not Jinshi, but her mother-in-law, would react. Surely even Taomei would go easy on her wounded daughter-in-law.

Jinshi answered for her: "That's fine."

Shikyou and Hulan were already standing, bowing respectfully to him.

Shikyou was the first to speak. "My sincere apologies, sir, for so frequently imposing on you for an audience." This was a kind of respect that had not been in evidence during the inheritance discussions. Presumably, Shikyou was after something.

Meanwhile, the third son, Hulan, was smiling. "Moon Prince, you seem in fine fettle. I offer you my heartfelt gratitude for your generous treatment of a criminal such as myself."

It was Hulan more than anyone else who had made their lives so difficult recently. Jinshi loathed leaving him to stand there and

grin, but knowing that he would smile just as broadly while he killed himself for his convictions was frightening.

"No one has said that what you've done has been forgotten," Jinshi replied, not allowing himself to sound less than controlled. Hulan kept right on smiling—but Shikyou's expression grew harder.

Hulan, in fact, was what they were here in this room to discuss. They had gathered to bring to light what he had been thinking and what he had done.

Meanwhile, Feilong, who might have been expected to be there, wasn't—because there were certain things they didn't want him to know.

Jinshi motioned to the others to sit down. Shikyou and Hulan waited until he was seated himself, then did so.

Chue, who had been sitting all the while, had a drink in her hand, something milky white and steaming. Goat's milk, probably, or maybe a soup with goat's milk in it. She was lacking blood; it was understandable. Jinshi decided to let it be as he began the discussion.

"Hulan. Why did you try to kill Shikyou? He's your older brother by blood."

There was no need for any preamble. And Jinshi was only asking in order to hear Hulan say it.

Hulan didn't blanch; he didn't even stop smiling. "In my way, I did what I thought was best for the western capital. For I-sei Province."

"And what you thought was best was to kill your own brother?" Jinshi asked tersely.

Shikyou was staring fixedly at Hulan. He must have been feeling very conflicted about his younger brother at that moment.

"I thought you and Shikyou were close," Jinshi continued. "It isn't as if he was a problem for you during the discussions about the inheritance, is it?"

"You're right—my brother did say that he needed no inheritance, and to divide it as we wished."

"It's still true," said Shikyou. "I don't need anything. You can all share out the old man's legacy however you see fit. I have no intention of governing the western capital. I leave that to you and Feilong to talk out. Most importantly of all, my name is Shikyou. I won't use the name of Gyoku ever again."

Shikyou was making the kind of offer that most second and

third sons would have salivated over. For the family that ruled I-sei Province, however, things were not so simple.

"And so you think Brother Feilong and I should govern the land together? I'm sorry, but that's preposterous. Do you believe, Brother, that all will go well for you simply because you decline to accept any inheritance and any duty?"

"Won't it? Feilong is a cool head. Smarter than me. He'll do right by this place. You can be his assistant. You might not be a perfect replacement for the old man right away, but in a few years, you'll have this place ticking along."

"A few years? When the next few years are going to be some of our hardest?" Finally, Hulan sounded upset—the humble, retiring youth had vanished. "I agree with you—our brother Feilong is indeed a calm and collected person. If life had allowed him to go to the royal capital as a bureaucrat, I think he would've risen far higher in the world than you, Brother Shikyou. But make him the head, make him the face, of the western capital? What happens then?" He seemed to be asking not just Shikyou, but Jinshi. "We have the aftermath of the insect swarm to deal with, the worsening of public order, food shortages—and in the immediate future we will have to consider the possibility of an invasion by another country. Do you think Brother Feilong has the *strength* to successfully navigate all that?"

"Well, he can just ask our grandfather and uncles for help, can't he?"

"Grandfather is old, and I sincerely doubt he'll be returning from the royal capital. As for our aunts and uncles, how far can we really rely on them? The entire reason Grandfather left our father in charge here was because, whatever you may think of his ideals, he possessed the necessary strength to hold it all together."

Jinshi couldn't disagree with that. If Gyoku-ou had possessed one thing, in spite of his personal beliefs, it was strength. His ability to work a crowd, almost the way a con artist would, was something Jinshi could learn from himself.

"True, things might be well while Grandfather remains in this world. And if things were still as they were before the swarm, the others might keep their peace. With Father gone, however, our aunts and uncles will not be shy in criticizing the main house. And Brother Feilong and I, neither of us the eldest son, will lack the influence to subdue our relatives, who have grown strong running

their respective trades in this province. That's why Brother Feilong waited and waited for you to return, Brother Shikyou. Because you were able to go fist to fist with Uncle Yohda and silence even him. *You* have the strength."

"Yohda" was a nickname meaning "youngest child." The youngest of Gyokuen's children was in fact Empress Gyokuyou, but the youngest among the menfolk would be the seventh son, the one who looked after livestock. The one who had supposedly been so incensed with Shikyou that they'd fought a duel with live steel.

"You're contradicting yourself," Jinshi said. "So far you've done nothing but heap praise on Shikyou. I'm asking why you would have wanted to kill him."

Chue piped up, "It's not a contradiction at all!" In her hand was a slice of soft fried bread. "As long as Mister Shikyou is alive, there will be *somebody* who backs him for leader. Which is a big ol' problem if you're trying to lead without him."

"Precisely," Hulan confirmed.

"What good would having Shikyou out of the picture do you? Didn't you just say that you and Feilong both lack the power to lead?" Jinshi asked.

At that, Chue and Hulan both grinned, the expressions oddly similar to each other.

"Indeed he did," Chue chirped. "But Mister Hulan—he found something, for better or worse. Someone he wanted in the western capital more than his unmotivated big brother."

"Correct again," Hulan said, and stared directly at Jinshi. Jinshi got a bad feeling.

"Among Master Gyoku-ou's three sons, Mister Shikyou is certainly the most suited to leadership. But as far as Mister Hulan was concerned, if there were someone *else* available, there'd be no need to fret about the new Yous. His goal, you see, was to help the western capital flourish. If there were someone with practical power, someone who would make sense as the political leader of the west..." Chue, too, looked at Jinshi.

"I'm sure it would have worked, if I could have gotten rid of my brother Shikyou. In *your* service, Moon Prince, I don't doubt that myself and my brother Feilong would have been excellent aides."

With that, Hulan got out of his chair, knelt on the ground, and bowed his head. "I realize I ask the impossible. Yet ask I must. Moon Prince, will you not stay in this city and guide the people of I-

sei Province? I offer anything that might be of use on this path, even my own head." He pounded his forehead repeatedly against the floor, and his eyes were shining, shining so brightly it was almost disturbing. The burns all over his body attested to the truth of what he said.

Without quite meaning to, Jinshi backed up a step. He looked at Gaoshun and Taomei, who stood in attendance behind him.

After a pause, Gaoshun said quietly, "I have heard that the Mi clan teaches its members that the highest joy is to obey the orders of their master."

"The highest joy..." Jinshi repeated uncertainly.

"Only say that you will remain here in the western capital, Moon Prince, and I will gladly tear off my head with my own hands!" Hulan said.

"I don't want you tearing anything off," Jinshi replied.

Who would clean it up afterward?

"Enough! Stop! You don't need to do this." Shikyou knelt beside Hulan, then imitated his brother in pressing his head to the ground. "You have heard the boy. All that he did, he did out of love for I-sei Province. Please, do not imagine that there is any need to cut off his head."

Well, Jinshi wasn't the one who had talked about cutting off anybody's head, was he? Hulan had offered to do that on his own.

"Brother Shikyou. I am of no special regard. If my life is what it takes to bring good upon the western capital, what of it?" There was no hesitation in Hulan's eyes—in fact, he seemed mystified that Shikyou would attempt to intercede for him.

Chue simply sat and watched them, but her eyes squinted in amusement. "It doesn't matter what you say, you won't get through to him," she drawled. "He's been raised for this since the day he was born. The two of you just *think* differently. You can tell a cat not to catch rats, but will it stop?"

"Cats and rats? Don't be absurd! Why would a person throw down his life for something so trivial?" Shikyou demanded, glaring at Chue. She, however, just sipped her goat's milk, unfazed.

"Something so trivial? If you can say that with a straight face, then you really won't ever be successor. I know your heart goes out to your little brother, but trying to take his role away from him, that's just selfish. I must say, Mister Shikyou, you really don't have the chops to cut it as successor. You can throw away the Gyoku

name, take on a nasty-sounding moniker, and make a lot of underworld connections if you like, but it doesn't suit you at all. You're in the way just by being around, so maybe you could go full puppet on the public stage. You want to protect your little brother, *that's* the way."

Once she had let all this out, Chue took another sip of milk.

Shikyou knelt there, dazed, whereas Hulan continued to look at Jinshi with his eyes sparkling.

Chue wasn't done, however. "And you, Mister Hulan, give it up already. I know you have your duty, but if it butts up against Miss Chue's duty, you can rest assured she'll use every means at her disposal to crush you like a little insect. Seeing as your existence is nothing but a hindrance to the Moon Prince."

"An interesting remark coming from you, Lady Chue. What can *you* do for the Moon Prince with those injuries? They'll never heal completely. Your rank will plummet."

"I'll still be higher than you, Mister Hulan. Miss Chue is quite nimble enough to do most anything she needs with her left hand. But being the kind lady she is, Miss Chue has an idea for a compromise. One that might even placate a youth like yourself. The Moon Prince might not lead the western capital, but what if there was a 'face' that could serve instead?" Chue turned to Jinshi and grinned again. "Mister Shikyou does have talent, you know. What his dear, departed father Master Gyoku-ou was so desperate to possess, Mister Shikyou has in spades. Let him be not a bird's beak, but a dragon's head."

Her grin grew even wider, and she looked at Shikyou.

"You'll stand for the western capital, won't you? You'll make a brilliant puppet, I'm sure of it."

Jinshi stole a glance at Taomei. Perhaps she knew of her daughter-in-law's business, for she said nothing. She seemed inordinately interested in the scraps of food left over on the table—and dedicated to not learning too much about the thinking of the Mi clan.

If he had known it would turn out this way, Jinshi reflected, he would have charged up even more back in his room.

Chapter 30: Growth

The wind that blew through was so cold it was almost painful.

Time passed quickly. Since her return to the western capital, Maomao had resumed her daily life almost as if nothing had happened. Before she knew it, the year had turned, and she was twenty-one years old.

Her days passed much as they had before; she spent her time making medicines in the office with the quack doctor, raising medicinal herbs in the greenhouse, and occasionally visiting Jinshi to do exams.

Well, maybe one thing was a little bit different.

"Daddy! Play with me!"

"C'mon, your dad is on his way to work, Gyokujun. We can play later."

Namely, Shikyou was now present at the main house. He'd traded his biaoshi outfit for more proper clothing, in which he did indeed much resemble Gyoku-ou. The similarity was so striking, in fact, that it made Maomao hope that the populace who had so revered Shikyou's father might support the son as well. After all, it was all too common for people to make judgments on appearances rather than character.

I do have to wonder, why the change of heart?

Maomao didn't pretend to understand it; she was just an apothecary. No doubt there had been much discussion between Shikyou and Jinshi.

There was a new piece of furniture in the medical office: a large couch. From what Maomao heard, the freak strategist had been a regular visitor while she was missing. He'd brought it with him, and here it had stayed.

How did they ever get around him?

The quack doctor must have entertained the strategist the whole time Maomao was away. The quack's interpersonal skills, Maomao reflected, must be among the most potent in all of Li. The only other person she could think of who could talk down that freak

was her father, Luomen.

"Oh! Excuse me, but could you grab that stick for me? My back's itchy," called Chue, who was lying on the couch. Her torso had been freed from its bandages, as had her right hand and arm. However, her elbow could only bend about half as far as it had before, and her hand and fingers moved only the slightest bit. Her arm hadn't fallen off, though, and the fact that she could move her fingers at all testified that Maomao had done well.

Chue's injuries were so severe that for a while she wasn't required to do any work, but was supposed to come to the medical office for physical rehab.

But now she's downright living here!

"Yes, of course, is this the one you want? If your back itches, we have some salve that can help," the quack doctor said, handing Chue a stick of the perfect length.

"Oooh, you know, that might not be a bad idea. Oh, and isn't it almost snack time?"

"It certainly is. Today I've got sweet potatoes, steamed and mixed with honey and then roasted. And I added some goat's milk to round out the flavor."

The quack doctor had become quite the chef, for what it was worth—which was one reason that Chue had made herself such a regular presence in the office. It was interesting to note, then, that the quack's ability to mix medicines hadn't improved in the least.

"Why, my dear quack, you've gotten even better than before! This dish is going to cause a revolution in Li's potato-cooking world!" Chue said, working her way assiduously through the pile of potato on her plate. Her left hand proved more than enough to enable her to eat.

"Miss Chue, if you'd be so kind as to leave some for the rest of us? I'm going to go call the others," Maomao said.

"Yeth, of courth," Chue replied around a mouthful of food. It hardly made her seem trustworthy: Maomao transferred what was left of the snack onto another plate. The quack was preparing some tea with an unusually strong smell—leaves from the central region, Maomao suspected. He would finally have some decent tea after spending so long boiling dandelion roots.

"Looks like things have gotten much more stable," Maomao remarked. They were also feeling more comfortable with the office's supply of medicine. There were still some food shortages and other

sources of unrest, but they'd won some leeway.

"Oh, by the way, we should be able to go back to the royal capital soon," Chue drawled.

"*What?*" Maomao asked.

"I forgot to mention. Tee hee! My husband asked me to tell you all, Miss Maomao. My bad!" Chue knocked herself on her forehead with a knuckle on her left hand. She winked and stuck out her tongue—Maomao found the gesture oddly aggravating.

"Is Master Jinshi going back as well?" Maomao asked.

"He sure is! It would be tough for him to stick around here much longer, and the succession is pretty well sorted out. For formal purposes, everyone is going to close up around Shikyou."

"Will that work?"

To be quite honest, Maomao was uneasy. Certainly, Shikyou had a talent for swiping the best moments out from under people's noses, and he had that "hero" quality. Despite being much more charismatic than his second and third brothers, though, he'd spent years wandering at his leisure. His martial prowess and an information network he could only have gained as a biaoshi would be assets, but it still seemed like there was a good deal he lacked.

"Are you sure he won't have, as the saying goes, the head of a dragon and the tail of a snake?"

His resemblance to Gyoku-ou would probably win him a good deal of support in the beginning. As the shine wore off, however, there was no telling how people would ultimately react to him.

"Even a slithery snake must do what he needs to do," Chue intoned. "We need Shikyou to be the hero of the western capital, and that's what he's going to have to be."

A hero, huh?

Thinking about it, Maomao realized that perhaps the reason Gyoku-ou had given Shikyou alone among his sons a political education was that it had been in Shikyou that Gyoku-ou saw the heroic image he had so idealized. He had wanted to pass his position on to his son, who was from the start what Gyoku-ou had labored and aspired to be.

"Shikyou's a lot of things, but he's not stupid. He was educated all along to be the leader here in the west, and running a biaoshi agency certainly gives you some experience in managing people."

"You don't think he's...too unserious? Too soft?"

Shikyou's personality was at odds with his name. He might act

like a villain, but he had a soft side.

"That's a fair question. That's why we need to make sure everything around him is solid."

"But what if the people around him don't trust him?" Maomao asked.

Chue only grinned and sipped her tea. "I think Feilong will have no trouble being there for his elder brother. And they've got Mister Rikuson too! What's more, you might not expect it, but Shikyou is rather popular with his uncles."

"His uncles? Didn't he fight with the one that's his own age?"

"The more you fight, the closer you are. If the second or third son had acceded to the leadership, I think some ambitious upstart might have tried to overthrow them. Uncle Yohda or the like."

So it went between a bunch of men who all seemed like a lot of trouble.

"Also, Vice Minister Lu will be sticking around for a while to help clean things up," Chue added.

"You mean that guy from the Board of Rites? What good would it do to leave someone in charge of religious observances here?"

"Vice Minister Lu's served a lot of positions in a lot of offices. The generous way to put it would be to say he's very versatile. The less generous way, that he's a jack-of-all-trades but a master of none. Still, he can do just about anything, so I'm sure he'll be able to handle things here."

"That makes him sound a lot like Lahan's Brother." Whatever—Maomao could finally relax a little. "The point is, we can go back."

She'd been starting to worry she would end up buried out here in the west. She heaved a sigh of relief.

"I think Mister Lihaku already knows. Lahan's Brother probably doesn't. Make sure you tell him, all right? There'll be lots to prepare."

"Sure thing," Maomao replied.

Lahan's Brother was in the fields he'd made by tearing up the main house's garden. He'd planted wheat—the wheat that he'd brought back at risk of his life during the insect swarm.

Maomao left the medical office to go find Lahan's Brother. She found him crab-walking in the fields—treading the wheat, she presumed.

"Lahan's B—"

She was just calling out to him when she spotted two children at the edge of her vision. Who should it be but Gyokujun and Xiaohong.

Is Gyokujun giving her a hard time again? Maomao had thought maybe the travails of the road had taught him a few lessons, but maybe not. *Why does he think I rescued him?!*

Maomao had become quite partial to Xiaohong, so she had every intention of dropping a knuckle on the spoiled bully's head—but something was off. Gyokujun was indeed strutting around about something, but Xiaohong only looked at him with lidded eyes. Maomao thought the expression looked familiar.

"Hey! Are you listening to me?" Gyokujun demanded, grabbing Xiaohong by the collar.

At that exact moment, there was a sturdy *whack*. It was Xiaohong's open palm, which had made contact with Gyokujun's cheek. Gyokujun was so startled that he lost his balance and fell square on his behind.

Gyokujun, clearly shaken, touched his reddened cheek. "Wh-Wh... What do you think you're doing?! Are you not afraid of me? You know I can chase the likes of you right out of the western capital!"

"No, I'm not afraid," Xiaohong said and looked down at him, still unfazed.

"Do... Do you know who my father is? He's the ruler of the western capital, you know!"

"So what if Uncle Shikyou rules the western capital? Go ahead and tell on me. He won't get rid of me over *this*. You should know that better than anyone, Gyokujun."

"Well, I'm gonna be leader next after my dad. Then I'll kick you out myself!"

"Heh heh!" The otherwise expressionless Xiaohong suddenly laughed.

"What's so funny?!"

"Oh, I just thought that if the likes of *you* were going to be leader here, maybe I'd go to the imperial capital and try to aim a little higher. What can you do? You're just a little shrimp who hides behind his daddy all the time. A shrimp who runs away leaking snot from his nose!"

Then, as if nothing had happened, Xiaohong simply walked away.

“S…Snnniiiifff!”

Brought to tears by a girl even younger than he was, Gyokujun was left with nothing to do but sit there on the ground, leaking snot and flailing angrily.

I feel someone watching me, Maomao thought. She turned around slowly to find Lahan’s Brother standing there.

“*What* did you teach that girl?” he asked, giving Maomao his most scathing look.

“Me? Nothing…”

“That wasn’t nothing! Did you see her expression? She looked exactly like you! Ah, she was a sweeter, more demure child when I knew her!”

“You’ve got it all wrong!”

No matter how Maomao struggled to convince him, however, Lahan’s Brother would not believe her. She spent so much time and energy on the subject, in fact, that she forgot the very important thing she had come to tell him.

Epilogue

The salt breeze felt wonderful; Maomao savored the wind of the sea as she walked across the deck of the ship.

They'd left I-sei Province behind and were underway on a pleasant sea voyage. The vessel they were on reminded her of the ones they'd taken on the way here, though it was slightly, subtly different in shape. Once again, they had three large vessels, with some merchant ships accompanying them.

Things had changed dramatically in the western capital over the past several months. There had been a time when people had muttered that the Emperor's younger brother had assassinated Gyoku-ou in order to take over the city, but with Gyoku-ou's eldest son Shikyou now involved in the local politics, impressions had changed. For all the chatter about Shikyou's delinquency, people seemed to regard him well enough. The fact that he was the spitting image of his father seemed to account for the lion's share of his popularity, but maybe there was another factor: the heroic quality that had been a performance for Gyoku-ou felt perfectly natural coming from Shikyou.

There were still potential problems with provisions, but Jinshi, the Emperor's younger brother, couldn't stay in the area forever, so it was decided that he would go home. Vice Minister Lu would have his hands full, no doubt, but hopefully he would do the best he could.

Frankly, he might find it easier to work with Jinshi back in the central region.

Those who had begrudged supplies to the west would find they could no longer refuse with His Majesty's brother close at hand. It wasn't the sort of thing the Imperial family would normally get involved in, but Maomao could easily imagine Jinshi doing just that.

I can't believe it's been almost a whole year since we got here. She wondered how much the imperial city had changed. She hoped everyone she knew there was doing well. *I forgot to buy*

souvenirs...but they won't be expecting any by now, will they?

She hadn't had time for such things. Well, she had one souvenir: the ambergris. She was sure glad to at least have something to give the cantankerous old madam. Otherwise, no excuse in the world would have spared her from the old lady's discipline.

Much as Maomao would have liked to finally relax, the ship home hosted certain people around whom she definitely could not do that.

"Miss Chue, Miss Chue."

"Yes? What is it, Miss Maomao?"

Chue was eating some raisins still on the vine, as if in wistful recollection of the western capital. With her left hand alone, she easily plucked them out of the bunch and popped them into her mouth.

"What is that old fart doing here?" Maomao asked, sending a glower toward the old fart—i.e., the freak strategist, who was at the bow.

"He's here for the same reason you are, Miss Maomao—to go home from the western capital," Chue drawled. "He was looking quite chipper at first, but the moment the ship got underway...well, he didn't even make it to the head, the poor thing. Just emptied the contents of his stomach right into the sweet sea breeze."

"Spare me the details. I can guess."

The sick still glittered with sea spray; Maomao started to feel bad for the aide nearby. There was a younger person there, too, with a bucket. Junjie, that was his name—he'd helped look after Maomao in the western capital.

"Master Lakan was supposed to be on another ship, but oh, the tantrum he threw! *'This time I'm going to go with Maomao! Wah wah!'* He looked ready to get some gunpowder involved if we weren't careful, and—well, you've got to know when to fold them. But he'll be lying low so long as we're sailing, so I think you should be just fine."

"Where was he going to get this gunpowder?" Maomao grumbled. She did *not* want anyone causing an explosion on any ship she was aboard.

Then she said, "I didn't know Junjie was going to be with us too."

So young, and already going abroad to work in order to earn

money to support his family. How very filial of him.

"Yes, indeed. He was more surprised than anyone to find out that his name was on the list of passengers heading back to the capital. Perhaps we can have him stick with Master Lakan for a while—our dear strategist does seem to get along better with kids."

So much for Certain Person No. 1 around whom Maomao couldn't relax.

As for Certain Person No. 2...

"I've finished organizing the cargo. What would you like me to do next?"

There was a humble young man with baggage in both hands. On his bare skin were red splotches that appeared to be burn scars.

Maomao glowered at him.

"Oh, you have? Then maybe you could swab in front of our cabins," said Chue. "Master Lakan didn't quite make it to the deck before he let loose, and it's not a pretty sight down there. Miss Maomao's and my rooms could each use a touch-up. Be thorough, now!"

"Yes, ma'am. When I'm finished, may I pay a visit to the Moon Prince?" The young man, whose name was Hulan, bowed politely.

"Whatever are you talking about? There's plenty more work for you to do after that! The moment you're done by the cabins, you'll need to start swabbing the deck." Chue pointed to the freak strategist, who was still actively vomiting.

"Why is...*this* guy here?" Maomao asked with undisguised displeasure.

"'This guy' is so terribly harsh. Please, feel free to simply call me Hulan." The young man was still grinning, the same as he always did. Maomao had found herself fleeing all over I-sei Province because she'd treated Shikyou after he was shot with a poison dart—but it was Xiaohong who had brought her to the injured man. And it was Hulan who had urged Xiaohong on.

Hulan was the one who had sought to subdue Shikyou on account of a succession dispute, and had dragged Maomao into it too. She'd had every intention of feeding him a knuckle sandwich when they next met, but somehow, seeing him covered from head to toe in burns, she didn't quite have the heart.

"Miss Maomao, Miss Maomao!"

"Miss Chue. I don't trust myself to stay calm around him."

"Oh, won't you let it pass this time?" Chue grinned as wide as

Hulan and pointedly held up her crippled right hand. It was she who had been most grievously hurt in their adventure, and if she urged temperance, there wasn't much Maomao could say.

"As you see, there's nowhere left for me in the western capital. More importantly, the duty I must execute has changed," Hulan said.

Maomao looked at him, puzzled. "I can see why they wouldn't want you in the western capital, but what's this about your duty?"

Hulan blushed slightly and looked down. "My duty now is to offer up my body for the sake of the master I ought to serve."

"Sorry. I don't follow." Maomao was feeling sicker by the minute. Her expression somewhat resembled the one that "abacus-glasses" Lahan occasionally leveled at Jinshi.

"I know you don't much care for me, Lady Maomao, but I ask you to trust me. I've accompanied this voyage in order to do my duty to the utmost. I offer and will offer up this body of mine for the sake of the Moon Prince at any moment he may ask, for it is by his grace that I live."

That's one weird-ass zealot.

Maomao looked at Chue, unimpressed. "Is it too late to trade him for Xiaohong?"

"The thought crossed my mind, but unfortunately, she's underage, so it was a no-go. I couldn't get Miss Yinxing to agree."

Well, at least she'd tried.

"Xiaohong! Ah, you are most discerning. I've long thought that girl could be very useful indeed."

"And why did you get this...useful girl wrapped up in your plot?" Maomao asked.

"Well, when I heard she was even more suitable than I was, how could I not want to meddle a bit? I never dreamed she would bring you of all people, Lady Maomao. I never meant for you to get involved. It's true, I swear it. You must believe me!"

Hulan made it all sound unaccountably frivolous. He was starting to look like a screw had come loose somewhere in his head.

"Oh! So that's the story." Chue seemed oddly prepared to take what he said at face value.

Maomao wasn't sure what it was Chue was taking from what Hulan said, but she had another question. "All right, Master Hulan, tell me: Could it be that you were testing me the entire time I was in the western capital?"

It was Hulan who had brought her the cases of food poisoning at the distillery as well as the sick VIP.

"*Testing* is such an unpleasant word. I simply brought you along wondering if you might be able to solve those problems, Lady Maomao."

"That includes the food poisoning at the distillery?" She wanted to be sure.

Hulan didn't answer, but only smiled.

"Oh, the distillery—I heard things were tough after that," Chue said, neatly changing the subject. Maomao took her point: much as she might want to corner Hulan, she wasn't to pursue this subject too deeply.

Chue went on, "A test sip is all well and good, but it turned out that they'd drunk their best wine dry. They just drank too much, until they didn't have enough to fulfill their orders, so they mixed in watered-down, inferior stuff."

"Inferior stuff?" Maomao asked. This story was starting to sound familiar.

"That's right. This was just about when there was all that commotion about their wine. They thought they'd gotten away with it, but then the food poisoning happened and everything came to light."

As if on cue, Chue and Hulan both grinned broadly. The two of them looked nothing alike, yet their smiles were identical.

"He's not hopeless, you see, but he's not very subtle. He's got to learn somehow."

"So now he's working for you, Miss Chue?"

"You got it! And I'm going to work him like a dog. Feel free to make him do whatever menial tasks you want, Miss Maomao."

"I look forward to working with you," Hulan said, strangely upbeat for someone who had been exiled from his home. Maomao let out a long sigh and turned away, leaving Hulan to ponder what to do about the freak strategist, the contents of whose stomach were currently forming a rainbow in the sky.

Maomao was sick of looking at either of them, so she turned her mind to considering where else she could be at that moment—whereupon she spotted a lookout's platform high up one of the masts.

"Excuse me, could I go up there?" she asked a nearby sailor.

"What would you do up there? It'd be dangerous for you, miss."

“I was just curious.”

“Curious? Do all you central types like high places?” He gave her a dubious look, but what did she care? If he’d pressed the point, she might have thought better of the idea, but the sailor brought her a rope. “Here, a lifeline. It *is* dangerous, so make sure you tie it tight around yourself.”

“Oh, thank you very much.” She was actually surprised how readily the man went along with her request. She tied the rope around her waist and then started working her way upward until she arrived at the lookout, which was about halfway up the mast. She was about to climb onto the platform when she realized someone had beaten her to it.

“What are you doing here, Maomao?” he asked.

“I could ask you the very same question, Master Jinshi.”

There was Jinshi, sitting on the lookout’s platform.

“Me? I just... You know. I was trying to get away from someone rather troublesome.”

“Master Basen? No, that wouldn’t make sense... Is it Master Hulan?”

Jinshi’s expression darkened: bingo.

“And what brings *you* up here?” he asked.

“It’s just such a lovely day that I wanted to be outside, but I’ve been trying to find somewhere the freak strategist isn’t vomiting.”

In other words, they were both there for roughly the same reason.

“Anyway, have a seat.”

“It’s a bit cramped.”

“Live with it.”

Maomao sat down, effectively shoulder to shoulder with Jinshi. What else could she do? It *was* cramped. Maybe they’d only let her up here because someone else had done it first.

“We’re finally going home,” Jinshi mused.

“It’s been a most circuitous route,” Maomao said.

“Don’t say that. Not when I’m finally in a decent mood.”

Jinshi looked at the sky: blue with puffy white clouds. The picture of peace, as if nothing bad could possibly happen.

“Things are going to be busy when we get back to the capital,” Maomao said.

“That’s for certain. I’m sure work has been piling up there, and supporting a distant land like I-sei Province from the royal capital

isn't going to be easy." Nonetheless, Jinshi's expression conveyed that it would have to be done.

The profile of his face was nearly perfect, marked only by a single stroke, a single scar. It would probably never fade, but then again, Maomao recalled, Jinshi seemed oddly fond of it.

It makes me think of everything that happened with the Shi clan.

It must have reminded Jinshi, too, each time he looked in a mirror or touched his cheek.

Maomao knew very well that this man, Jinshi, felt his responsibilities keenly. He didn't need her to remind him that there would be lots of work to do when they got home. What had moved her to say something so insensitive?

She couldn't think of much else to talk about, however, so she ventured, "What do you most want to do when we get back to the capital, Master Jinshi?"

"What do I want to do?" Jinshi pondered. He pondered so hard that he began to frown, and tilt his head, and *hrmmm*.

I really don't think he needs to think about it that hard. Maomao hadn't meant that much by the question.

"Do you really need to think about it that hard, sir?"

Maomao could think of all kinds of things she wanted to do when they got back: pick medicinal herbs, compound some medicines, experiment with the effects of some new drugs. All kinds of things.

"Ah, it's just... I'm sure there's a panoply of things I *don't* want to do waiting for me, and all I can seem to think of is how I'm going to deal with them."

"Ahhh... You know, I do remember them saying something about there being a new potential consort."

Who was she again? Gyoku-ou's adopted daughter? Maomao couldn't help feeling a bit bad for the girl now that Gyoku-ou, who had sent her to the rear palace, was dead.

"Empress Gyokuyou has been dealing with that matter on my behalf. Bringing her around, I don't doubt."

"Bringing her around, sir?"

"Didn't you know? Empress Gyokuyou is famous—or perhaps I should say infamous—for her way with people. During her time in the rear palace, she practically redrew the power map among the Emperor's women."

Maomao thought back to her time inside the rear-palace walls.

Now that Jinshi mentioned it, she did recall Gyokuyou frequently having tea with middle and lower consorts, drawing them into her faction.

"I don't believe the Empress's position is going to change," Jinshi said.

Maomao had sent some letters while she was in the western capital, but she had naturally hesitated to send anything to such an august personage as the Empress herself. She had no idea what Gyokuyou's present situation was.

"I'm told that both the young prince and the princess are doing very well," Jinshi said.

"That's good to hear."

Maomao was closer to the princess than she was to the young heir apparent. The inquisitive little girl must be getting big by now.

"Would you like to pay them a visit when we get back?"

"Could I? Empress Gyokuyou has attempted to, ahem, 'scout' me several times already."

"You know what? Forget I said anything," Jinshi replied immediately. Then he said, "What *do* I want to do? You know, there is one thing..."

"What's that, sir?"

Jinshi's hand brushed Maomao's, settling against it, emphasizing how much bigger his hand was than hers.

"Is this what you wanted to do?" Maomao asked.

"There are other things too."

"Oh, is that so?"

"But I can't." His eyes drifted down to the spewing figure on the deck. "I'm restraining myself as hard as I can. It's not easy."

Maomao was by now well acquainted with Jinshi's feelings—and she knew that he no longer had to pretend to be a eunuch. It made it slightly awkward to be perched up here so close to him. But at the same time...it wasn't *that* unpleasant.

"I know you have your circumstances, Miss Maomao. It's important not to get carried away by your emotions! But you can't let that be an excuse either."

Why was it that she seemed to think of Chue's words whenever she was with Jinshi?

What she felt for Jinshi was not, she suspected, a burning passion. She couldn't respond to him with the same feelings he brought to her, but at the same time, there weren't that many

people in the world with whom she could feel this safe.

She was starting to figure out what her own feelings were and had begun to believe that she ought to accept them. It might have been nice if it hadn't been the clowning lady-in-waiting who'd given her that final push, but what were you going to do?

What am *I going to do?*

Maomao's hand still sat against Jinshi's. Nothing more had happened, which was fine by her, but now she wasn't sure when to pull her hand away.

"Maomao," Jinshi said.

"Yes, sir?"

At the same time she turned to look up into Jinshi's face, she found Jinshi's face coming down toward hers.

The touch of his lips was so light, so casual, that for a second she didn't know what had happened.

At first, he didn't say anything.

"What? Are you embarrassed?" she exclaimed, when she realized he'd flushed red at even this most chaste of kisses.

"No, ahem, I just... I've restrained myself, and I meant to continue restraining myself..."

Before she could stop herself, Maomao exclaimed, "Restraint! You didn't restrain yourself so much before!"

"I didn't..." Jinshi appeared to remember something, and turned grim. Presumably he was thinking of "before," when he had forced a kiss on her, and she'd turned the tables and given him a taste of his own medicine.

"Don't worry, sir. I won't get you back for it this time."

"Er... That's not what I..."

"You'd rather I did?"

Jinshi pursed his lips and looked at Maomao. "I rather thought you despised me."

This time it was her turn not to say anything. Instead, she glanced away from him.

I think *I don't despise him...do I?*

If not, then of course she wouldn't try to get him back. But even so, she couldn't accept Chue's words so wholeheartedly as to actually say it at this moment.

"Well?"

"Well what, sir?"

"You know perfectly well!"

“Please don’t shout. What if the freak strategist were to notice us? Do you want him to climb up here, retching as he goes?”

“Urk. No, I... I don’t.”

Jinshi went silent. Maomao, too, quietly looked down toward the deck. But she didn’t take her hand away.

There are a lot of people going back with us who weren’t here when we came out, she thought. For one thing, the freak strategist hadn’t been on their ship, but they also had several of the farming buddies Lahan’s Brother had recruited. Maomao sincerely felt for them; they’d been done a bad turn.

It was only then that she realized something.

“You know, I don’t see Lahan’s Brother anywhere,” she said.

“Lahan’s Brother? He should be here. All the people involved with farming were supposed to be on this ship,” said Jinshi.

Then Maomao thought back. Had she told Lahan’s Brother that they were returning to the central region?

No... I got distracted watching Xiaohong stand up for herself and it pushed the subject completely out of my mind.

It still didn’t make sense. Even if Maomao had forgotten to tell him, surely *someone* would have.

“Wait... Didn’t he say a few days ago that he was going to go check on the fields in the villages?” Maomao asked.

“He must have come back. We checked off everyone on the ship’s list of passengers.”

“That’s true; good point. I’m sure we didn’t leave him behind. But maybe we should check the list again, just to be completely certain.”

“Good idea. By the way, what *is* Lahan’s Brother’s name?”

There was a long pause. Maomao felt her hand start to sweat, and her only consolation was that Jinshi’s did too.

Jinshi and Maomao looked at the land, now far in the distance. The ship would not be going back to port now.

They heard gulls crying overhead. Maomao thought she saw, faintly, the image of Lahan’s Brother hovering in the air.

Some time later, they finally learned Lahan’s Brother’s name, at the same time as they learned he wasn’t on the ship with them. As for Lahan’s Brother, back in the western lands, he still hadn’t noticed that he had been left behind.

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The Apothecary Diaries

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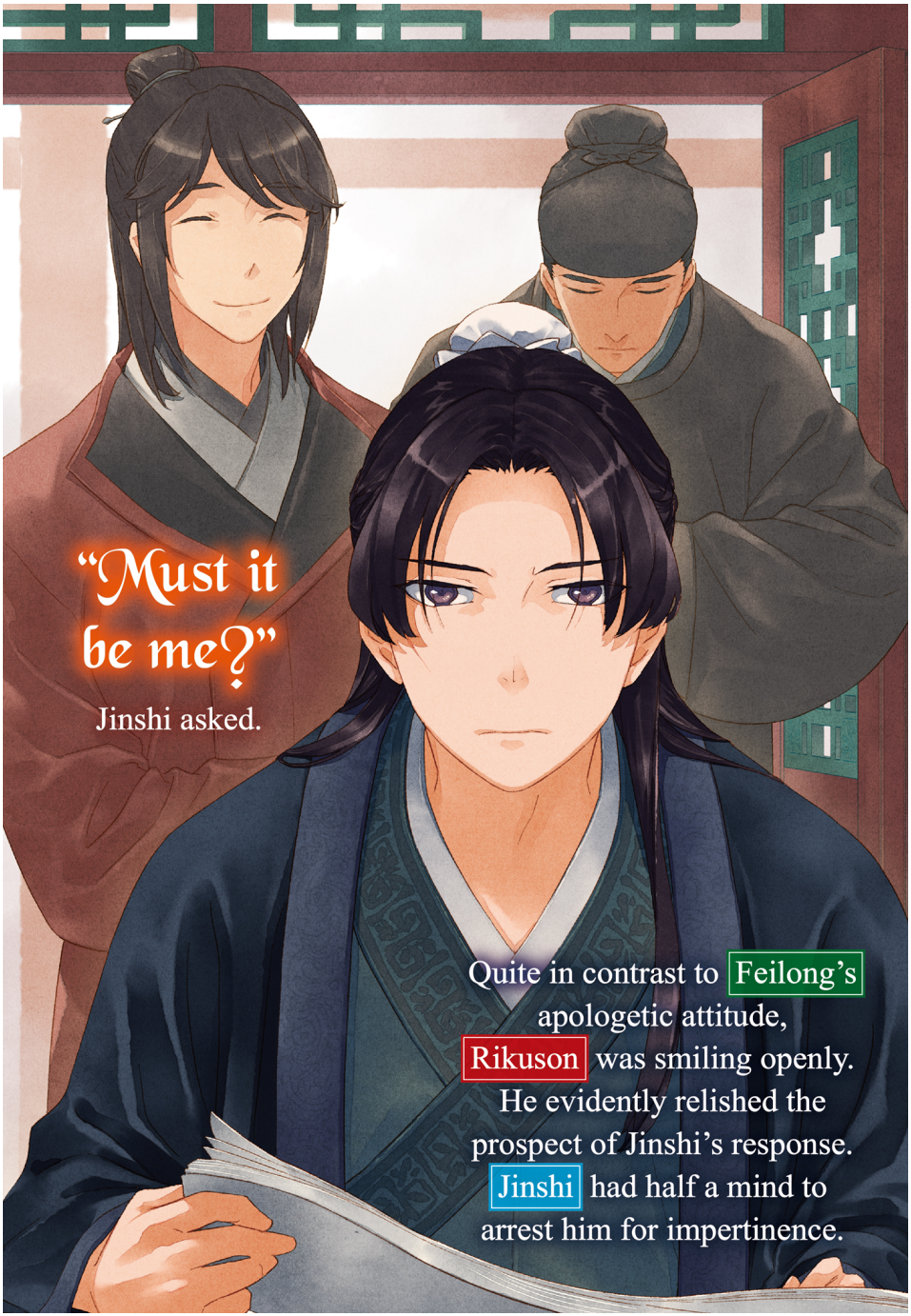
"Must it be me?"
Jinshi asked.
Quite in contrast to Feilong's apologetic attitude, Rikuson was smiling openly. He evidently relished the prospect of Jinshi's response. Jinshi had half a mind to arrest him for impertinence.

Chue seated herself in the very middle of the room and started mumbling something.

Baryou
didn't know.
All he knew
was that there
was nothing
he could do.
He brushed
her undamaged
hand, the
left one.
The fingers
were cold.
"Mmr..."

The little monster was pulling Xiaohong's hair.
"Gyokujun!
What in the world are you doing?!"

Maomao could hardly think straight. Maybe it was the release of all that tension, but she felt oddly safe. Was it the thick carpet that felt so nice? Or was it the warmth of another body right next to her?
"True enough..."
She tried to brush his hand away, but couldn't. Instead, her breathing gradually evened out, and slowly, so did Jinshi's.

Translator's Notes – The *Apothecary Diaries* Diaries vol. 12

A Word and a Prayer
O Lord, do You see us?
—Chue

Hi, and thanks for reading *The Apothecary Diaries* volume 12! The western capital arc may be wrapping up, but it's going to give us one more chance to examine a case study in translation.

In this volume, Chue teaches Maomao a line of scripture. In Japanese it goes: "*Kami yo, watashi-tachi wo mite imasu ka?*" Grammatically, the sentence is quite simple, but getting it to sound just right in translation was, as so often, not such an easy matter.

Let's start by breaking it down in classic vocabulary-list form. All of the words in this sentence are common and used often.

kami: god, God, or gods
yo: an emphatic particle, almost like a verbal exclamation mark
watashi-tachi: us, we (literally, "I" plus a plural marker)
wo: a particle that marks the object of a sentence; the word that comes before *wo* is the object of the verb
mite imasu: present progressive ("-ing") form of the verb *miru* ("to see")
ka: an interrogative particle, similar to a verbal question mark

The rendering of this sentence revolves around two cruxes: the translation of *kami* and of *miru*. Both words are, again, common, but the way we choose to represent them in English will affect the way the reader hears them in their own head.

As noted above, *kami* is a common word, but it has a wide range of meanings. It's often associated with Shinto deities and spirits, but has been appropriated for other traditions; for example,

Japanese Christians sometimes refer to God as *kami-sama*. Here, the translation team had to draw on their thinking as readers, because the proper rendering of *kami* in this case is related to what we know of the world of *The Apothecary Diaries*.

We know that the chapel in which Chue and Maomao find themselves is located in "the west" and that the faith practiced there seems to have come from farther west still, perhaps from Shaoh or even beyond. To the extent that Li seems to be inspired by at least some elements of ancient China, the lands to its west may correspond with near-eastern locations like Persia. Which is to say, places with some concept of monotheism—something that might not be native to Li, based on the variety of religious ceremonies we've seen characters like Jinshi perform.

I'm not suggesting that we can pin down exact, real-world parallels for the various countries in *The Apothecary Diaries*, simply that there's good reason to think that the religion associated with this chapel is a monotheistic one—and hence there are good grounds for translating *kami* in the singular. Certainly, one could simply use "God." We ended up with "Lord" for a couple of reasons. One was a sense that practitioners of this religion, whatever exactly it is, might prefer to address the deity with a title of honor rather than with the deity's name—"God" sounds a bit direct, where "Lord" has a more respectful tone. The other reason was a meta-consideration: however we translated this line, for English readers (especially those in the US), it was always going to flirt with sounding like the title of Judy Blume's cultural touchstone of a young-adult novel, *Are You There, God? It's Me, Margaret*. Choosing "Lord" instead of "God" helped diminish this resemblance at least a little.

What about *miru*, then? In Japanese, *miru* is the basic verb of vision. It corresponds to a wide range of English words including "look," "see," and "watch," among others. Here it's in the present progressive, indicating a continuing action. Hence the first thing that came into my mind was "Are you watching us?"—a more natural progressive construction in English than, say, "Are you seeing us?" or even "Are you looking at us?" However, "Are you watching us?" has a certain "Big Brother" undertone, whereas the Japanese clearly involves not just looking but, by dint of looking, acknowledging the existence of the thing that is looked at.

That was why we felt that "see" was a more appropriate choice

here, as “seeing someone” has a similar range of meaning in English: not just visually acknowledging that a thing is there, but (at least in some contexts) acknowledging the significance of its existence. As noted above, “Are you seeing us?” sounds a bit awkward, but “Do you see us?” is perfectly natural while still conveying the active, ongoing nature of the seeing. Finally, we chose to capitalize “You” as a way of emphasizing the possibly monotheistic character of this faith. This is purely a hint to the reader, of course, as in principle, the capital *Y* doesn’t sound any different than *y* when spoken aloud.

So it was that we arrived at our translation: “O Lord, do You see us?” It’s a simple sentence with a complex texture, hopefully one that comes across in English as well as it does in Japanese.

Until next time, read widely, and have fun!

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Kusuriya No Hitorigoto
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